EXPERIENCE FALL'S SPLENDOR

THE FALL OF THE YEAR

DALLAS LORE SHARP

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The Fall of the Year

by

Dallas Lore Sharp

"ONE OF THE EAGLES STRUCK ME A STINGING BLOW ON THE HEAD"

Contents

NOTE

It is interesting to observe that the subject of the initial for chapter IV is witch-hazel; that for chapter VII, the cocoons of the cecropia, the promethea, and the basket worm; and that for chapter VIII, a sprig of alder, with the old fruit and a budded catkin. The subjects of the other initials require no identification.

INTRODUCTION

There are three serious charges brought against nature books of the present time, namely, that they are either so dull as to be unreadable, or so fanciful as to be misleading, or so insincere as to be positively harmful. There is a real bottom to each of these charges.

Dull nature-writing is the circumstantial, the detailed, the cataloguing, the semi-scientific sort, dried up like old Rameses and cured for all time with the fine-ground spice of measurements, dates, conditions—observations, so called. For literary purposes, one observation of this kind is better than two. Rarely does the watcher in the woods see anything so new that for itself it is worth recording. It is not what one sees, so much as the manner of the seeing, not the observation but its suggestions that count for interest to the reader. Science wants the exact observation; nature-writing wants the observation exact and the heart of the observer along with it. We want plenty of facts in our nature books, but they have all been set down in order before; what has not been set down before are the author's thoughts and emotions. These should be new, personal, and are pretty sure therefore to be interesting.

More serious than dullness (and that is serious enough) is the charge that nature books are untrustworthy, that they falsify the facts, and give a wrong impression of nature. Some nature books do, as some novels do with the facts of human life. A nature book all full of extraordinary, better-class animals

who do extraordinary stunts because of their superior powers has little of real nature in it. There are no such extraordinary animals, they do no such extraordinary things. Nature is full of marvels—Niagara Falls, a flying swallow, a star, a ragweed, a pebble; but nature is not full of dragons and centaurs and foxes that reason like men and take their tea with lemon, if you please.

I have never seen one of these extraordinary animals, never saw anything extraordinary out of doors, because the ordinary is so surprisingly marvelous. And I have lived in the woods practically all of my life. And you will never see one of them—a very good argument against anybody's having seen them.

The world out of doors is not a circus of performing prodigies, nor are nature-writers strange half-human creatures who know wood-magic, who talk with trees, and call the birds and beasts about them as did one of the saints of old. No, they are plain people, who have seen nothing more wonderful in the woods than you have, if they would tell the truth.

When I protested with a popular nature-writer some time ago at one of his exciting but utterly impossible fox stories, he wrote back,—

"The publishers demanded that chapter to make the book sell."

Now the publishers of this book make no such demands. Indeed they have had an expert naturalist and woodsman hunting up and down every line of this book for errors of fact, false suggestions, wrong sentiments, and extraordinaries of every sort. If this book is not exciting it is the publishers' fault. It may not be exciting, but I believe, and hope, that it is *true* to all of my out of doors, and not untrue to any of yours.

The charge of insincerity, the last in the list, concerns the

author's style and sentiments. It does not belong in the same category with the other two, for it really includes them. Insincerity is the mother of all the literary sins. If the writer cannot be true to himself, he cannot be true to anything. Children are the particular victims of the evil. How often are children spoken to in baby-talk, gush, hollow questions, and a condescension as irritating as coming teeth! They are written to, also, in the same spirit.

The temptation to sentimentalize in writing of the "beauties of nature" is very strong. Raptures run through nature books as regularly as barbs the length of wire fences. The world according to such books is like the Garden of Eden according to Ridinger, all peace, in spite of the monstrous open-jawed alligator in the foreground of the picture, who must be smiling, I take it, in an alligatorish way at a fat swan near by.

Just as strong to the story-writer is the temptation to blacken the shadows of the picture—to make all life a tragedy. Here on my table lies a child's nature-book every chapter of which ends in death—nothing but struggle to escape for a brief time the bloody jaws of the bigger beast—or of the superior beast, man.

Neither extreme is true of nature. Struggle and death go on, but, except where man interferes, a very even balance is maintained, peace prevails over fear, joy lasts longer than pain, and life continues to multiply and replenish the earth. "The level of wild life," to quote my words from "The Face of the Fields," "of the soul of all nature is a great serenity. It is seldom lowered, but often raised to a higher level, intenser, faster, more exultant."

This is a divinely beautiful world, a marvelously interesting world, the best conceivable sort of a world to live in, notwithstanding its gypsy moths, tornadoes, and germs, its laws of

gravity, and of cause and effect; and my purpose in this series of nature books is to help my readers to come by this belief. A clear understanding of the laws of the Universe will be necessary for such a belief in the end, and with the understanding a profound faith in their perfect working together. But for the present, in these books of the Seasons, if I can describe the out of doors, its living creatures and their doings, its winds and skies with their suggestions—all of the out of doors, as it surrounds and supports me here in my home on Mullein Hill, Hingham, so that you can see how your out of doors surrounds and supports you, with all its manifold life and beauty, then I have done enough. If only I can accomplish a fraction of this I have done enough.

Dallas Lore Sharp.

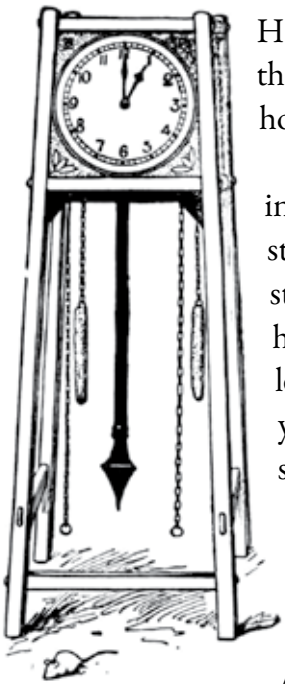
Mullein Hill, September, 1911.

THE FALL OF THE YEAR

CHAPTER I

THE CLOCK STRIKES ONE

"The clock strikes one,
    And all is still around the house!
But in the gloom
    A little mouse
Goes creepy-creep from room to room."



THE clock of the year strikes one!—not in the dark silent night of winter, but in the hot light of midsummer.

It is a burning July day,—one o'clock in the afternoon of the year,—and all is still around the fields and woods. All is still. All is hushed. But yet, as I listen, I hear things in the dried grass, and in the leaves overhead, going "creepy-creep," as you have heard the little mouse in the silent night.

I am lying on a bed of grass in the shade of a great oak tree, as the clock of the year strikes one. I am all alone in the quiet of the hot, hushed day. Alone? Are you alone in the big upstairs at midnight, when you hear the little mouse going "creepy-creep" from room to room? No; and I am not alone.

High overhead the clouds are drifting past; and between them, far away, is the blue of the sky—and how blue, how cool, how far, far away! But how near and warm seems the earth!

I lie outstretched upon it, feeling the burnt crisp grass beneath me, a beetle creeping under my shoulder, the heat of a big stone against my side. I throw out my hands, push my fingers into the hot soil, and try to take hold of the big earth as if I were a child clinging to my mother.

And so I am. But I am not frightened, as I used to be, when the little mouse went "creepy-creep," and my real mother brought a candle to scare the mouse away. It is because I am growing old? But I cannot grow old to my mother. And the earth is my mother, my second mother. The beetle moving under my shoulder is one of my brothers; the hot stone by my side is another of my brothers; the big oak tree over me is another of my brothers; and so are the clouds, the white clouds drifting, drifting, drifting, so far away yonder, through the blue, blue sky.

The clock of the year strikes one. The summer sun is overhead. The flood-tide of summer life has come. It is the noon hour of the year.

The drowsy silence of the full, hot noon lies deep across the field. Stream and cattle and pasture-slope are quiet in repose. The eyes of the earth are heavy. The air is asleep. Yet the round shadow of my oak begins to shift. The cattle do not move; the pasture still sleeps under the wide, white glare.

But already the noon is passing—to-day I see the signs of coming autumn everywhere.

Of the four seasons of the year summer is the shortest, and

the one we are least acquainted with. Summer is hardly a pause between spring and autumn, simply the hour of the year's noon.

We can be glad with the spring, sad with the autumn, eager with the winter; but it is hard for us to go softly, to pause and to be still with the summer; to rest on our wings a little like the broad-winged hawk yonder, far up in the wide sky.

But now the hawk is not still. The shadow of my oak begins to lengthen. The hour is gone; and, wavering softly down the languid air, falls a yellow leaf from a slender birch near by. I remember, too, that on my way through the woodlot I frightened a small flock of robins from a pine; and more than a week ago the swallows were gathering upon the telegraph wires. So quickly summer passes. It was springtime but yesterday, it seems; to-day the autumn is here.

It is a July day. At dawn the birds were singing, fresh and full-throated almost as in spring. Then the sun burned through the mist, and the chorus ceased. Now I do not hear even the chewink and the talkative vireo. Only the fiery notes of the scarlet tanager come to me through the dry white heat of the noon, and the resonant song of the indigo bunting—a hot, metallic, quivering song, as out of a "hot and copper sky."

There are nestlings still in the woods. This indigo bunting has eggs or young in the bushes of the hillside; the scarlet tanager by some accident has but lately finished his nest in the tall oaks. I looked in upon some half-fledged cuckoos along the fence. But all of these are late. Most of the year's young are upon the wing.

A few of the spring's flowers are still opening. I noticed the bees upon some tardy raspberry blossoms; here and there is a stray dandelion. But these are late. The season's fruit has already

set, is already ripening. Spring is gone; the sun is overhead; the red wood-lily is open. To-day is the noon of the year.

High noon! and the red wood-lily is aflame in the old fields, and in the low tangles of sweet-fern and blackberry that border the upland woods.

The wood-lily is the flower of fire. How impossible it would be to kindle a wood-lily on the cold, damp soil of April! It can be lighted only on this kiln-dried soil of July. This old hilly pasture is baking in the sun; the low mouldy moss that creeps over its thin breast crackles and crumbles under my feet; the patches of sweet-fern that blotch it here and there crisp in the heat and fill the smothered air with their spicy breath; while the wood-lily opens wide and full, lifting its spotted lips to the sun for his scorching kiss. See it glow! Should the withered thicket burst suddenly into a blaze, it would be no wonder, so hot and fiery seem the petals of this flower of the sun.

How unlike the tender, delicate fragrant flowers of spring are these strong flowers of the coming fall! They make a high bank along the stream—milkweed, boneset, peppermint, turtle-head, joe-pye-weed, jewel-weed, smartweed, and budding goldenrod! Life has grown lusty and lazy and rank.

But life has to grow lusty and rank, for the winter is coming; and as the woodchucks are eating and eating, enough to last them until spring comes again, so the plants are storing fat in their tap-roots, and ripening millions of seeds, to carry them safely through the long dead months of winter.

The autumn is the great planting time out of doors. Every autumn wind is a sower going forth to sow. And he must have seeds and to spare—seeds for the waysides for the winter birds to eat, seeds for the stony places where there is no depth of

soil for them, seeds for the ploughed fields where they are not allowed to grow, seeds for every nook and corner, in order that somewhere each plant may find a place to live, and so continue its kind from year to year.

Look at the seeds of the boneset, joe-pye-weed, milkweed, and goldenrod! Seeds with wings and plumes and parachutes that go floating and flying and ballooning.

> "Over the fields where the daisies grow,
> Over the flushing clover,
> A host of the tiniest fairies go—
> Dancing, balancing to and fro,
> Rolling and tumbling over.
>
> "Quivering, balancing, drifting by,
> Floating in sun and shadow—
> Maybe the souls of the flowers that die
> Wander, like this, to the summer sky
> Over a happy meadow."

So they do. They wander away to the sky, but they come down again to the meadow to make it happy next summer with new flowers; for these are the seed-souls of thistles and daisies and fall dandelions seeking new bodies for themselves in the warm soil of Mother Earth.

Mother Earth! How tender and warm and abundant she is! As I lie here under the oak, a child in her arms, I see the thistledown go floating by, and on the same laggard breeze comes up from the maple swamp the odor of the sweet pepper-bush. A little flock of chickadees stop in the white birches and quiz me. "Who are you?" "Who are you-you-you?" they ask, dropping down closer and closer to get a peek into my face.

Perhaps they don't know who I am. Perhaps I don't know

who they are. They are not fish hawks, of course; but neither am I an alligator or a pumpkin, as the chickadees surely know. This much I am quite sure of, however: that this little flock is a family—a family of young chickadees and their two parents, it may be, who are out seeing the world together, and who will stay together far into the cold coming winter.

They are one of the first signs of the autumn to me, and one of my surest, sweetest comforts as the bleak cold winds come down from the north. For the winds will not drive my chickadees away, no matter how cold and how hard they blow, no matter how dark and how dead the winter woods when, in the night of the year, the clock strikes twelve.

The clock to-day strikes one, and all is still with drowsy sleep out of doors. The big yellow butterflies, like falling leaves, are flitting through the woods; the thistledown is floating, floating past; and in the sleepy air I see the shimmering of the spiders' silky balloons, as the tiny aeronauts sail over on their strange voyages through the sky.

How easy to climb into one of their baskets, and in the fairy craft drift far, far away! How pleasant, too, if only the noon of the year would last and last; if only the warm sun would shine and shine; if only the soft sleepy winds would sleep and sleep; if only we had nothing to do but drift and drift and drift!

But we have a great deal to do, and we can't get any of it done by drifting. Nor can we get it done by lying, as I am lying, outstretched upon the warm earth this July day. Already the sun has passed overhead; already the cattle are up and grazing; already the round shadow of the oak tree begins to lie long across the slope. The noon hour is spent. I hear the quivering click-clack of a mowing-machine in a distant hay field. The

work of the day goes on. My hour of rest is almost over, my summer vacation is nearly done. Work begins again to-morrow.

But I am ready for it. I have rested outstretched upon the warm earth. I have breathed the sweet air of the woods. I have felt the warm life-giving sun upon my face. I have been a child of the earth. I have been a brother to the stone and the bird and the beetle. And now I am strong to do my work, no matter what it is.

CHAPTER II

ALONG THE HIGHWAY OF THE FOX

WITH only half a chance our smaller wild animals—the fox, the mink, the 'coon, the 'possum, the rabbit—would thrive, and be happy forever on the very edges of the towns and cities. Instead of a hindrance, houses and farms, roads and railways are a help to the wild animals, affording them food and shelter as their natural conditions never could. So, at least, it seems; for here on Mullein Hill, hardly twenty miles from the heart of Boston, there are more wild animals than I know what to do with—just as if the city of Boston were a big skunk farm or fox farm, from which the countryside all around (particularly my countryside) were being continually restocked.

But then, if I seem to have more foxes than a man of chickens needs to have, it is no wonder, living as I do on a main traveled road in Foxland, a road that begins off in the granite ledges this side of Boston, no one knows where, and, branching, doubling, turning, no one knows how many times, comes down at last along the trout brook to the street in front of my house, where,

leaping the brook and crossing the street, it runs beside my foot-path, up the hill, to the mowing-field behind the barn.

When I say that last fall the hunters, standing near the brook where this wild-animal road and the wagon road cross, shot seven foxes, you will be quite ready to believe that this is a much-traveled road, this road of the foxes that cuts across my mowing-field; and also that I am quite likely to see the travelers, now and then, as they pass by.

So I am, especially in the autumn, when game grows scarce; when the keen frosty air sharpens the foxes' appetites, and the dogs, turned loose in the woods, send the creatures far and wide for—chickens!

For chickens? If you have chickens, I hope your chicken-coop does not stand along the side of a fox road, as mine does. For straight across the mowing-field runs this road of the foxes, then in a complete circle right round the chicken yard, and up the bushy ridge into the wood.

How very convenient! Very, indeed! And how thoughtful of me! Very thoughtful! The foxes appreciate my kindness; and they make a point of stopping at the hen-yard every time they pass this way.

It is interesting to know, too, that they pass this way almost every night, and almost every afternoon, and at almost every other odd time, so that the hens, with hundreds of grubby acres to scratch in, have to be fenced within a bare narrow yard, where they can only be *seen* by the passing foxes.

Even while being driven by the dogs, when naturally they are in something of a hurry, the foxes will manage to get far enough ahead of the hounds to come by this way and saunter leisurely around the coop.

I have a double-barreled gun and four small boys; but terrible as that combination sounds, it fails somehow with the foxes. It is a two-barreled-four-boyed kind of a joke to them. They think that I am fooling when I blaze away with both barrels at them. But I am not. Every cartridge is loaded with BB shot. But that only means *Blank-Blank* to them, in spite of all I can do. The way they jump when the gun goes off, then stop and look at me, is very irritating.

This last spring I fired twice at a fox, who jumped as if I had hit him (I must have hit him), then turned himself around and looked all over the end of the barn to see where the shots were coming from. They were coming from the back barn window, as he saw when I yelled at him.

It was an April morning, cold and foggy, so cold and foggy and so very early that my chattering teeth, I think, disturbed my aim.

It must have been about four o'clock when one of the small boys tiptoed into my room and whispered, "Father, quick! there's a fox digging under Pigeon Henny's coop behind the barn."

I was up in a second, and into the boys' room. Sure enough, there in the fog of the dim morning I could make out the moving form of a fox. He was digging under the wire runway of the coop.

The old hen was clucking in terror to her chicks. It was she who had awakened the boys.

There was no time to lose. Downstairs I went, down into the basement, where I seized the gun, and, slipping in a couple of shells, slid out of the cellar door and crept stealthily into the barn.