

EMBRACE THE QUIET BEAUTY AND HIDDEN  
WONDERS OF THE WINTER WILDERNESS

# WINTER



DALLAS LORE SHARP

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# WINTER

*by*

DALLAS LORE SHARP





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THE FOX SPARROWS' BATH

## INTRODUCTION

As in *The Fall of the Year*, so here in *Winter*, the second volume of this series, I have tried by story and sketch and suggestion to catch the spirit of the season. In this volume it is the large, free, strong, fierce, wild soul of Winter which I would catch, the bitter boreal might that, out of doors, drives all before it; that challenges all that is wild and fierce and strong and free and large within us, till the bounding red blood belts us like an equator, and the glow of all the tropics blooms upon our faces and down into the inmost of our beings.

Winter within us means vitality and purpose and throbbing life; and without us in our fields and woods it means widened prospect, the storm of battle, the holiness of peace, the poetry of silence and darkness and emptiness and death. And I have tried throughout this volume to show that Winter is only a symbol, that death is only an appearance, that life is everywhere, and that everywhere life dominates even while it lies buried under the winding-sheet of the snow.

“A simple child,  
That lightly draws its breath,  
What should it know of death?”

Why, this at least, that the winter world is not dead; that the cold is powerless to destroy; that life flees and hides and sleeps, only to waken again, forever stronger than death—fresher, fairer, sweeter for its long winter rest.

But first of all, and always, I have tried here to be a naturalist

and nature-lover, pointing out the sounds and sights, the things to do, the places to visit, the how and why, that the children may know the wild life of winter, and through that knowledge come to love winter for its own sake.

And they will love it. Winter seems to have been made especially for children. They do not have rheumatism. Let the old people hurry off down South, but turn the children loose in the snow. The sight of a snowstorm affects a child as the smell of catnip affects a cat. He wants to roll over and over and over in it. And he should roll in it; the snow is his element as it is a polar bear cub's.

I love the winter, and so do all children—its bare fields, empty woods, flattened meadows, its ranging landscapes, its stirless silences, its tumult of storms, its crystal nights with stars new cut in the glittering sky, its challenge, defiance, and mighty wrath. I love its wild life—its birds and animals; the shifts they make to conquer death. And then, out of this winter watching, I love the gentleness that comes, the sympathy, the understanding! One gets very close to the heart of Nature through such understanding.

DALLAS LORE SHARP.

MULLEIN HILL, March, 1912.

WINTER



## CHAPTER I

# HUNTING THE SNOW

**Y**ou want no gun, no club, no game-bag, no steel trap, no snare when you go hunting the snow. Rubber boots or overshoes, a good, stout stick to help you up the ridges, a pair of field-glasses and a keen eye, are all you need for this hunt,—besides, of course, the snow and the open country.

You have shoveled the first snow of the winter; you have been snowballing in it; you have coasted on it; and gone sleigh-riding over it; but unless you have gone hunting over it you have missed the rarest, best sport that the first snowfall can bring you.

Of all the days to be out in the woods, the day that follows the first snowfall is—the best? No, not the best. For there is the day in April when you go after arbutus; and there is the day in June when the turtles come out to lay in the sand; the muggy, cloudy day in August when the perch are hungry for you in the creek; the hazy Indian Summer day when the chestnuts are dropping for you in the pastures; the keen, crisp February day when the ice spreads glassy-clear and smooth for you over the mill-pond; the muddy, raw, half-thawed, half-lighted, half-drowned March day when the pussy-willows are breaking, and the first spring frogs are piping to you from the meadow. Then there is—every day, every one of the three hundred and sixty-five days, each of them best days to be out in the live world of the fields and woods.

But *one* of the very best days to be out in the woods is the day that follows the first winter snowfall, for that is the day when you must shoulder a good stout stick and go gunning. Gunning with a stick? Yes, with a stick, and rubber boots, and bird-glasses. Along with this outfit you might take a small jointed foot-rule with which to measure your quarry, and a notebook to carry the game home in.

It ought to be the day after the first real snow, but not if that snow happens to be a blizzard and lies deep in dry powdery drifts, for then you could hardly follow a trail if you should find one. Do not try the hunt, either, if the snow comes heavy and wet; for then the animals will stay in their dens until the snow melts, knowing, as they do, that the soft slushy stuff will soon disappear. The snow you need will lie even and smooth, an inch or two deep, and will be just damp enough to pack into tight snowballs.

If, however, the early snows are not ideal, then wait until over an old crusted snow there falls a fresh layer about an inch deep. This may prove even better hunting, for by this time in the winter the animals and birds are quite used to snow-walking, and besides, their stores of food are now running short, compelling them to venture forth whether or not they wish to go.

It was early in December that our first hunting-snow came last year. We were ready for it, waiting for it, and when the winter sun broke over the ridge, we started the hunt at the hen-yard gate, where we saw tracks in the thin, new snow that led us up the ridge, and along its narrow back, to a hollow stump. Here the hunt began in earnest; for not until that trail of close, double, nail-pointed prints went under the stump were the four small boys convinced that we were tracking a skunk and not a cat.



The creature had moved leisurely—that you could tell by the closeness of the prints. Wide-apart tracks in the snow mean hurry. Now a cat, going as slowly as this creature went, would have put down her dainty feet almost in a single line, and would have left round, cushion-marked holes in the snow, not triangular, nail-pointed prints like these. Cats do not venture into holes under stumps, either.



We had bagged our first quarry! No, no! We had not pulled that wood pussy out of his hole and put him into our game-bag. We did not want to do that. We really carried no bag; and if we had, we should not have put the wood pussy into it, for we were hunting tracks, not animals, and “bagging our quarry” meant trailing a creature to its den, or following its track till we had discovered something it had done, or what its business was, and why it was out. We were on the snow for animal *facts*, not pelts.

We were elated with our luck, for this stump was not five minutes by the ridge path from the hen-yard. And here, standing on the stump, we were only sixty minutes away from Boston Common by the automobile, driving no faster than the law allows. So we were hunting, not in a wilderness, but just outside our dooryard and almost within the borders of a great city.

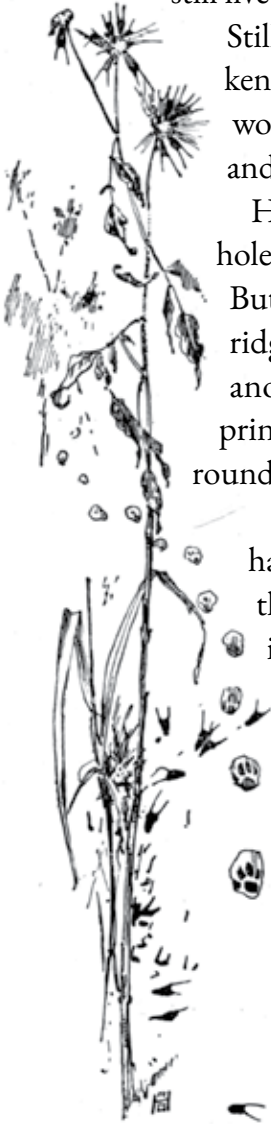
And that is the first interesting fact of our morning hunt. No

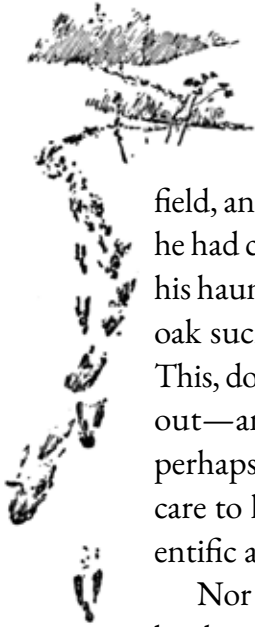
one but a lover of the woods and a careful walker on the snow would believe that here in the midst of hayfields, in sight of the smoke of city factories, so many of the original wild wood-folk still live and travel their night paths undisturbed.

Still, this is a rather rough bit of country, broken, ledgy, boulder-strewn, with swamps and woody hills that alternate with small towns and cultivated fields for many miles around.

Here the animals are still at home, as this hole of the skunk's under the stump proved. But there was more proof. As we topped the ridge on the trail of the skunk, we crossed another trail, made up of bunches of four prints,—two long and broad, two small and roundish,—spaced about a yard apart.

A hundred times, the winter before, we had tried that trail in the hope of finding the form or the burrow of its maker; but it crossed and turned and doubled, and always led us into a tangle, out of which we never got a clue. It was the track of the great northern hare, as we knew, and we were relieved to see the strong prints of our cunning neighbor again; for, what with the foxes and the hunters, we were afraid it might have fared ill with him. But here he was, with four good legs under him; and, after bagging our skunk,





we returned to pick up the hare's trail, to try our luck once more.

We followed his long, leisurely leaps down the ridge, out into our mowing-field, and over to the birches below the house. Here he had capered about in the snow, had stood up on his haunches and gnawed the bark from off a green oak sucker two and a half feet from the ground. This, doubtless, was pretty near his length, stretched out—an interesting item; not exact to the inch, perhaps, but close enough for us; for who would care to kill him in order to measure him with scientific accuracy?

Nor was this all; for up the footpath through the birches came the marks of two dogs. They joined the marks of the hare. And then, back along the edge of the woods to the bushy ridge, we saw a pretty race.

It was all in our imaginations, all done for us by those long-flinging footprints in the snow. But we saw it all—the white hare, the yelling hounds, nip and tuck, in a burst of speed across the open field which must have left a gap in the wind behind.

It had all come as a surprise. The hounds had climbed the hill on the scent of a fox, and had started the hare unexpectedly.



Off he had gone with a jump. But just such a jump of fear is what a hare's magnificent legs were intended for.

Those legs carried him a clear twelve feet in some of the longest leaps for the ridge; and they carried him to safety,



so far as we could read the snow. In the medley of hare-and-hound tracks on the ridge there was no sign of a tragedy. He had escaped again—but how and where we have still to learn.

We had bagged our hare,—yet we have him still to bag,—and taking up the trail of one of the dogs, we continued our hunt. One of the joys of this snow-hunting is having a definite road or trail blazed for you by knowing, purposeful wild-animal feet.

You do not have to blunder ahead, breaking your way into this wilderness world, trusting luck to bring you somewhere. The wild animal or the dog goes this way, and not that, for a reason. You are watching that reason all along; you are pack-fellow to the hound; you hunt with him.

Here the hound had thrust his muzzle into a snow-capped pile of slashings, had gone clear round the pile, then continued on his way. But we stopped; for out of the pile, in a single, direct line, ran a number of mouse prints, going and coming. A dozen white-footed mice might have traveled that road since the day before, when the snow had ceased falling.



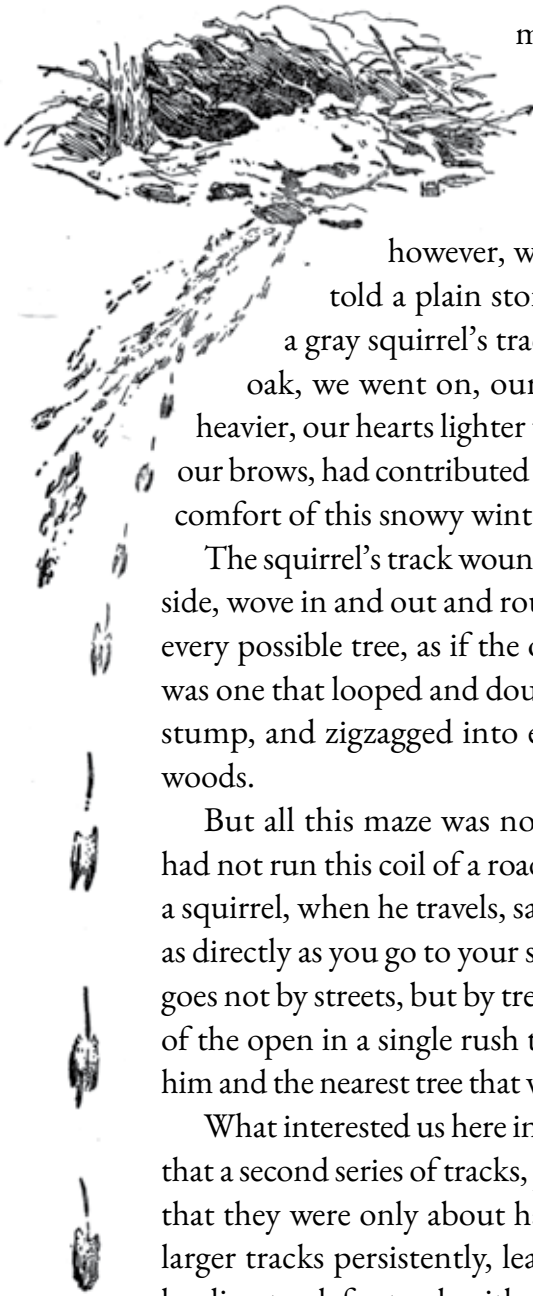
We entered the tiny road, for in this kind of hunting a mouse is as good as a mink, and found ourselves descending the woods

toward the garden patch below. Halfway down we came to a great red oak, into a hole at the base of which, as into the portal of some mighty castle, ran the road of the mice. That was the end of it. There was not a single straying footprint beyond the tree.

I reached in as far as my arm would go, and drew out a fistful of pop-corn cobs. So here was part of my scanty crop! I pushed in again, and gathered up a bunch of chestnut shells, hickory-nuts and several neatly rifled hazelnuts. This was story enough. There must be a family of mice living under the slashing-pile, who for some good reason kept their stores here in the recesses of this ancient red oak. Or was this some squirrel's barn being pilfered by the mice, as my barn is the year round? It was not all plain. But this question, this constant riddle of the woods, is part of our constant joy in the woods. Life is always new, and always strange, and always fascinating.

It has all been studied and classified according to species. Any one knowing the woods at all, would know that these were mouse tracks, would even know that they were the tracks of the white-footed mouse, and not the tracks of the jumping mouse, the house mouse, or the meadow mouse. But what is the whole small story of these prints? What purpose, what intention, what feeling, do they spell? What and why?—a hundred times!

So it is not the bare tracks that we are hunting; it is the meaning of the tracks—where they are going, and what they are going for. Burns saw a little mouse run across the furrows as he was plowing and wrote a poem about it. So could we write a poem if we like Burns would stop to think what the running of these little mice across the snow might mean. The woods and fields, summer and winter, are full of poems that might be written if we only knew just all that the tiny snow-prints of a wood



mouse mean, or understood just what, "root and all, and all in all," the humblest flower is.

The pop-corn cobs, however, we did understand; they told a plain story; and, falling in with a gray squirrel's track not far from the red oak, we went on, our burdenless game-bag heavier, our hearts lighter that we, by the sweat of our brows, had contributed a few ears of corn to the comfort of this snowy winter world.

The squirrel's track wound up and down the hillside, wove in and out and round and round, hitting every possible tree, as if the only road for a squirrel was one that looped and doubled, and tied up every stump, and zigzagged into every tree trunk in the woods.

But all this maze was no ordinary journey. He had not run this coil of a road for breakfast, because a squirrel, when he travels, say for distant nuts, goes as directly as you go to your school or office; only he goes not by streets, but by trees, never crossing more of the open in a single rush than the space between him and the nearest tree that will take him on his way.

What interested us here in the woods was the fact that a second series of tracks, just like the first, except that they were only about half as large, dogged the larger tracks persistently, leaping tree for tree, and landing track for track with astonishing accuracy—

tracks which, had they not been evidently those of a smaller squirrel, would have read to us most menacingly.

As this was the mating season for squirrels, I suggested that it might have been a kind of Atalanta's race here in the woods. But why did so little a squirrel want to mate with one so large? They would not look well together, was the answer of the small boys. They thought it much more likely that Father Squirrel had been playing wood-tag with one of his children.

Then, suddenly, as sometimes happens in the woods, the true meaning of the signs was fairly hurled at us, for down the hill, squealing and panting, rushed a full-sized gray squirrel, with a red squirrel like a shadow, like a weasel, at his heels.

For just an instant I thought it was a weasel, so swift and silent and gliding were its movements, so set and cruel seemed its expression, so sure, so inevitable, its victory.



Whether it ever caught the gray squirrel or not, and what it would have done had it caught the big fellow, I do not know. But I have seen the chase often—the gray squirrel nearly exhausted with fright and fatigue, the red squirrel hard after him. They tore round and round us, then up over the hill, and disappeared.

One of the rarest prints for most snow-hunters nowadays, but one of the commonest hereabouts, is the quick, sharp track

of the fox. In the spring particularly, when my fancy young chickens are turned out to pasture, I have spells of fearing that the fox will never be exterminated here in this untillable but beautiful chicken country. In the winter, however, when I see Reynard's trail across my lawn, when I hear the music of the baying hounds and catch a glimpse of the white-tipped brush



swinging serenely in advance of the coming pack, I cannot but admire the capable, cunning rascal, cannot but be glad for him, and marvel at him, so resourceful, so superior to his almost impossible conditions, his almost numberless foes.

We started across the meadow on his trail, but found it leading so straightaway for the ledges, and so continuously blotted out by the passing of the pack, that, striking the wallowy path of a muskrat in the middle of the meadow, we took up the new scent to see what the shuffling, cowering water-rat wanted from across the snow.

A man is known by the company he keeps, by the way he wears his hat, by the manner of his laugh; and among the wild animals nothing tells more of character than their manner of moving. You can read animal character as easily in the snow as you can read act and direction.

The timidity, the indecision, the lack of purpose, the restless, meaningless curiosity of this muskrat were evident from the first in the starting, stopping, returning, going-on track

he had plowed out in the thin snow.

He did not know where he was going or what he was going for; he knew only that he insisted upon going back, but all the while kept going on; that he wanted to go to the



right or to the left, yet kept moving straight ahead.

We came to a big wallow in the snow, where, in sudden fear, he had had a fit at the thought of something that might not have happened to him had he stayed at home. Every foot of the trail read, "He would if he could; if he couldn't, how could he?"

We followed him on, across a dozen other trails, for it is not every winter night that the muskrat's feet get the better of his head, and, willy-nilly, take him abroad. Strange and fatal weakness! He goes and cannot stop.

Along the stone wall of the meadow we tracked him, across the highroad, over our garden, into the orchard, up the woody hill to the yard, back down the hill to the orchard, out into the garden, and back toward the orchard again; and here, on a

knoll just at the edge of the scanty, skeleton shadow where the sunlight fell through the trees, we lost him.

Two mighty wings, we saw, had touched the snow lightly here, and the lumbering trail had vanished as into the air.

Close and mysterious the shadowy silent wings hang poised indoors and out. Laughter and tears are companions. Life begins, but death sometimes ends the trail. Yet the sum of life, outdoors and in, is peace, gladness, and fulfillment.

## CHAPTER II

# THE TURKEY DRIVE

**T**he situation was serious enough for the two boys. It was not a large fortune, but it was their whole fortune, that straggled along the slushy road in the shape of five hundred weary, hungry turkeys, which were looking for a roosting-place.

But there was no place where they could roost, no safe place, as the boys well knew, for on each side of the old road stretched the forest trees, a dangerous, and in the weakened condition of the turkeys, an impossible roost on such a night as was coming.

For the warm south wind had again veered to the north; the slush was beginning to grow crusty, and a fine sifting of snow was slanting through the open trees. Although it was still early afternoon, the gloom of the night had already settled over the forest, and the turkeys, with empty crops, were peevishly searching the bare trees for a roost.

It was a strange, slow procession that they made, here in the New Brunswick forest—the flock of five hundred turkeys, toled forward by a boy of eighteen, kept in line by a well-trained shepherd-dog that raced up and down the straggling column, and urged on in the rear by a boy of nineteen, who was followed, in his turn, by an old horse and farm wagon, creeping along behind.

It was growing more difficult all the time to keep the turkeys moving. But they must not be allowed to stop until darkness

should put an end to the march. And they must not be allowed to take to the trees at all. Some of them, indeed, were too weak to roost high; but the flock would never move forward again if exposed in the tall trees on such a night as this promised to be.

The thing to do was to keep them stirring. Once allow them to halt, give one of them time to pick out a roosting-limb for himself, and the march would be over for that afternoon. The boys knew their flock. This was not their first drive. They knew from experience that once a turkey gets it into his small head to roost, he is bound to roost. Nothing will stop him. And in this matter the flock acts as a single bird.

In the last village, back along the road, through which they had passed, this very flock took a notion suddenly to go to roost, and to go to roost on a little chapel as the vesper bells were tolling. The bells were tolling, the worshipers were gathering, when, with a loud gobble, one of the turkeys in the flock sailed into the air and alighted upon the ridge-pole beside the belfry! Instantly the flock broke ranks, ran wildly round the little building, and with a clamor that drowned the vesper bell, came down on the chapel in a feathered congregation that covered every shingle of the roof. Only the humor and quick wit of the kindly old priest prevented the superstitious of his people from going into a panic. The service had to wait until the birds made themselves comfortable for the night—belfry, roof, window-sills, and porch steps thick with roosting turkeys!

The boys had come to have almost a fear of this mania for roosting, for they never knew when it might break out or what strange turn it might take. They knew now, as the snow and the gray dusk began to thicken in the woods, that the flock must not go to roost. Even the dog understood the signs,—the

peevish *quint, quint, quint*, the sudden bolting of some gobbler into the brush, the stretching necks, the lagging steps,—and redoubled his efforts to keep the line from halting.

For two days the flock had been without food. Almost a week's supply of grain, enough to carry them through to the border, had been loaded into the wagon before starting in upon this wild, deserted road through the Black Creek region; but the heavy, day-long snowstorm had prevented their moving at all for one day, and had made travel so nearly impossible since then that here they were, facing a blizzard, with night upon them, five hundred starving turkeys straggling wearily before them, and a two days' drive yet to go!

The two brothers had got a short leave from college, and had started their turkey drive in the more settled regions back from the New Brunswick border. They had bought up the turkeys from farm to farm, had herded them in one great flock as they drove them leisurely along, and had moved all the while toward the state line, whence they planned to send them through Maine for the New England market. Upon reaching the railroad, they would rest and feed the birds, and ship them, in a special freight-car ordered in advance, to a Boston commission house, sell the horse and rig for what they could get, and, with their dog, go directly back to college.

More money than they actually possessed had gone into the daring venture. But the drive had been more than successful until the beginning of the Black Creek road. The year before they had gone over the same route, which they had chosen because it was sparsely settled and because the prices were low. This year the farmers were expecting them; the turkeys were plentiful; and the traveling had been good until this early snow