

**THE FALL
OF THE YEAR**

***Books by
Dallas Lore Sharp***

THE SEASONS

The Fall of the Year

Winter

The Spring of the Year

Summer

The Year Out of Doors

Ways of the Woods

The Whole Year Round

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The Face of the Fields

THE FALL
OF THE YEAR

by

Dallas Lore Sharp

illustrated by

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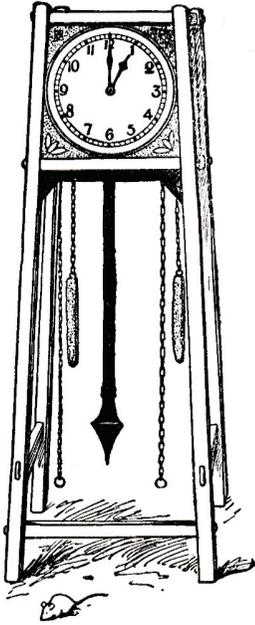
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CHAPTER I

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.”

HE clock of the year strikes one!¹—
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

¹ *The clock of the year strikes one*: When, in the daytime, the clock strikes one, the hour of noon is past; the afternoon begins. On the 21st of June the clock of the year strikes twelve—noon! By late July the clock strikes one—the noon hour is past! Summer is gone; autumn—the afternoon of the year—begins.

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overhead, going “creepy-creep,”² 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. Is it 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

²*going “creepy-creep”*: In the quiet of some July day in fields or woods, listen to the stirring of the insects and other small wood creatures. All summer long they are going about their business, but in the midst of stronger noises we are almost deaf to their world of little sounds.

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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.³ 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

³*begins to shift*: Why is the oak's shadow likely to be "round" at noon? What causes the shadow to "shift" or move? In which direction would it move?

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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.⁴ 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 chewink⁵ and the talkative vireo.⁶ Only the fiery notes of the scarlet tanager⁷ 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.”⁸

⁴*falls a yellow leaf from a slender birch near by . . . small flock of robins from a pine . . . swallows were gathering upon the telegraph wires:* Next summer, note the exact date on which you first see signs of autumn—the first falling of the leaves, the first gathering of birds for their southern trip. Most of the migrating birds go in flocks for the sake of companionship and protection.

⁵*chewink* (named from his call, che-WINK; accent on second syllable) or ground robin, or towhee or joree; one of the finch family. You will know him by his saying “chewink” and by his vigorous scratching among the dead leaves, and by his red-brown body and black head and neck.

⁶*vireo:* the red-eyed vireo, the commonest of the vireo family; often called “Preacher”; builds the little hanging nest from a small fork on a bush or tree so low often that you can look into it.

⁷*fiery notes of the scarlet tanager:* His notes are loud and strong, and he is dressed in fiery red clothes and sings on the fieriest of July days.

⁸*resonant song of the indigo bunting:* or indigo-bird, one of the finch family. He sings from the very tip of a tree as if to get up close under the dome of the sky. Indeed, his notes seem

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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 accident⁹ has but lately finished his nest in the tall oaks. I looked in upon some half-fledged cuckoos¹⁰ 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-lily¹¹ 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

to strike against it and ring down to us; for there is a peculiar ringing quality to them, as if he were singing to you from inside a great copper kettle.

⁹*scarlet tanager by some accident*: The tanager arrives among the last of the birds in the spring, and builds late; but, if you find a nest in July or August, it is pretty certain to be a second nest, the first having been destroyed somehow—a too frequent occurrence with all birds.

¹⁰*half-fledged cuckoos*: The cuckoo also is a very late builder. I have more than once found its eggs in July.

¹¹*red wood-lily*: Do you know the wood-lily, or the "wild orange-red lily" as some call it (*Lilium philadelphicum*)? It is found from New England to North Carolina and west to Missouri, but only on hot, dry, sandy ground, whereas the turk's-cap and the wild yellow lily are found only where the ground is rich and moist.

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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 moss¹² that creeps over its thin breast crackles and crumbles under my feet; the patches of sweet-fern¹³ 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!¹⁴ 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

¹²*low mouldy moss*: Bring to school a flake, as large as your hand, of the kind of lichen you think this may be. Some call it “reindeer moss.”

¹³*sweet-fern*: Put a handful of sweet-fern (*Myrica asplenifolia*) in your pocket, a leaf or two in your book; and whenever you pass it in the fields, pull it through your fingers for the odor. Sweet gale and bayberry are its two sweet relatives.

¹⁴*milkweed, boneset, peppermint, turtle-head, joe-pye-weed, jewel-weed, smartweed, and budding goldenrod*: Go down to the nearest meadow stream and gather for school as many of these flowers as you can find. Examine their seeds.

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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.¹⁵ 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,¹⁶
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.”

¹⁵*wind is a sower going forth to sow*: Besides the winds what other seed-scatterers do you know? They are many and very interesting.

¹⁶ “Over the fields where the daisies grow”: From “Thistledown” in a volume of poems called *Summer-Fallow*, by Charles Buxton Going.

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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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ A little flock of chickadees¹⁹ 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

¹⁷*seed-souls of thistles and daisies and fall dandelions seeking new bodies for themselves in the warm soil of Mother Earth:* On your country walks, watch to see where such seeds have been caught, or have fallen. They will be washed down into the earth by rain and snow. If you can mark the place, go again next spring to see for yourself if they have risen in “new bodies” from the earth.

¹⁸*sweet pepper-bush:* The sweet pepper-bush is also called white alder and clethra.

¹⁹*chickadees:* Stand stock-still upon meeting a flock of chickadees and see how curious they become to know you. You may know the chickadee by its tiny size, its gray coat, black cap and throat, its saying “chick-a-dee,” and its plaintive call of “phœbe” in three distinct syllables.

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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.²⁰

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,²¹ 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!

²⁰*clock strikes twelve:* As we have thought of midsummer as the hour from twelve to one in the day, so the dead of winter seems by comparison the twelve o'clock of midnight.

²¹*shimmering of the spiders' silky balloons:* It is the curious habit of many of the spiders to travel, especially in the fall, by throwing skeins of silky web into the air, which the breezes catch and carry up, while the spiders, like balloonists, hang in their web ropes below and sail away.

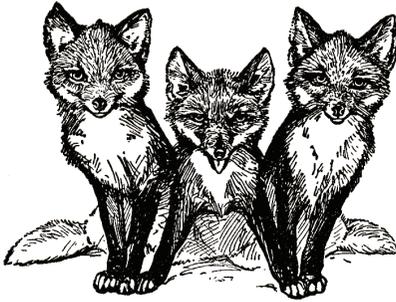
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But we have a great deal to do, and we can't get any of it done by drifting. Nor can we get it done by lying, as I am lying, outstretched upon the warm earth this July day. Already the sun has passed overhead; already the cattle are up and grazing; 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,²²

²²*Mullein Hill*: the name of the author's country home in Hingham, Massachusetts. The house is built on the top of a wooded ridge looking down upon the tops of the orchard trees and away over miles of meadow and woodland to the Blue Hills, and at night to the lights that flash in Boston Harbor. Years before the house was built the ridge was known as Mullein Hill because of the number and size of the mulleins (*Verbascum Thapsus*) that grew upon its sides and top.

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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 foxes²³ 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-field²⁴ 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.

²³There are two species of foxes in the eastern states—the gray fox, common from New Jersey southward, and the larger red fox, so frequent here in New England and northward, popularly known as Reynard. Far up under the Arctic circle lives the little white or Arctic fox, so valuable for its fur; and in California still another species known as the coast fox. The so-called silver or blue, or black, or cross fox, is only the red fox with a blackish or bluish coat.

²⁴*mowing-field*: a New England term for a field kept permanently in grass for hay.

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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 acres²⁵ 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

²⁵*grubby acres*: referring to the grubs of various beetles found in the soil and under the leaves of its woodland.

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away with both barrels at them. But I am not. Every cartridge is loaded with BB shot.²⁶ 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 coop²⁷ 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

²⁶*BB shot*: the name of shot about the size of sweet pea seed.

²⁷*Pigeon Henny's coop*: a pet name for one of the hens that looked very much like a pigeon.

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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.

The back window was open. The thick wet fog poured in like dense smoke. I moved swiftly in my bare feet and peered down upon the field. There stood the blur of the coop,—a dark shadow only in the fog,—but where was the fox?

Pushing the muzzle of my double-barreled gun across the window-sill, I waited. And there in the mist stood the fox, reaching in with his paw under the wire that inclosed the coop.

Carefully, deliberately, I swung the gun on the window-sill until the bead drew dead²⁸ upon the thief; then, fixing myself as firmly as I could with bare feet, I made sure of my mark and fired.

I do not wonder that the fox jumped. I jumped, myself, as both barrels went off together. A gun is a sudden thing at any time of day, but so early in the morning, and when everything was wrapped in silence and ocean fog, the double explosion was extremely startling.

The fox jumped, as naturally he would. When, however, he turned deliberately around and looked all over the end of the barn to see where I was firing from, and stood there, until I shouted at him—I say it was irritating.

²⁸*bead drew dead*: when the little metal ball on the end of the gun-barrel, used to aim by, showed that the gun was pointing directly at the fox.

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But I was glad, on going out later, to find that neither charge of shot had hit the coop. The coop was rather large, larger than the ordinary coop; and taking that into account, and the thick, uncertain condition of the atmosphere, I had not made a bad shot after all. It was something not to have killed the hen.

But the fox had killed eleven of the chicks. One out of the brood of twelve was left. The rascal had dug a hole under the wire; and then, by waiting as they came out, or by frightening them out, had eaten them one by one.

There are guns and guns, and some, I know, that shoot straight. But guns and dogs and a dense population have not yet availed here against the fox.

One might think, however, when the dogs are baying hard on the heels of a fox, that one's chickens would be safe enough for the moment from that particular fox. But there is no pack of hounds hunting in these woods swift enough or keen enough to match the fox. In literature the cunning of the fox is very greatly exaggerated. Yet it is, in fact, more than equal to that of the hound.

A fox, I really believe, enjoys an all-day run before the dogs. And as for house dogs, I have seen a fox, that was evidently out for mischief and utterly tired of himself, come walking along the edge of the knoll here by the house, and, squatting on his haunches, yap down lonesomely at the two farm dogs below.

This very week I heard the hounds far away in the ledges. I listened. They were coming toward me, and

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apparently on my side of the brook. I had just paused at the corner of the barn when the fox, slipping along the edge of the woods, came loping down to the hen-yard within easy gun-shot of me. He halted for a hungry look at the hens through the wire fence, then trotted slowly off, with the dogs yelping fully five minutes away in the swamp.

How many minutes would it have taken that fox to snatch a hen, had there been a hen on *his* side of the fence? He could have made chicken-sandwiches of a hen in five minutes, could have eaten them, too, and put the feathers into a bolster—almost! How many of my hens he has made into pie in less than five minutes!

As desserts go, out of doors, he has a right to a pie for fooling the dogs out of those five crowded minutes. For he does it against such uneven odds, and does it so neatly—sometimes so very thrillingly! On three occasions I have seen him do the trick, each time by a little different dodge.

One day, as I was climbing the wooded ridge behind the farm, I heard a single foxhound yelping at intervals in the hollow beyond. Coming cautiously to the top, I saw the hound below me beating slowly along through the bare sprout-land, half a mile away, and having a hard time holding to the trail. Every few minutes he would solemnly throw his big black head into the air, stop stock-still, and yelp a long doleful yelp, as if begging the fox to stop its fooling and try to leave a reasonable trail.

The hound was walking, not running; and round

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and round he would go, off this way, off that, then back, when, catching the scent again, he would up with his muzzle and howl for all the woods to hear. But I think it was for the fox to hear.

I was watching the curious and solemn performance, and wondering if the fox really did hear and understand, when, not far from me, on the crown of the ridge, something stirred.

Without moving so much as my eyes, I saw the fox, a big beauty, going slowly and cautiously round and round in a small circle among the bushes, then straight off for a few steps, then back in the same tracks; off again in another direction and back again; then in and out, round and round, until, springing lightly away from the top of a big stump near by, the wily creature went gliding swiftly down the slope.

The hound with absolute patience worked his sure way up the hill to the circle and began to go round and round, sniffing and whimpering to himself, as I now could hear; sniffing and whimpering with impatience, but true to every foot-print of the trail. Round and round, in and out, back and forth, he went, but each time in a wider circle, until the real trail was picked up, and he was away with an eager cry.

I once again saw the trick played, so close to me, and so deliberately, with such cool calculating, that it came with something of a revelation to me of how the fox may feel, of what may be the state of mind in the wild animal world.²⁹

²⁹*the mind in the wild animal world*: how the animals may

ALONG THE HIGHWAY OF THE FOX

It was a late October evening, crisp and clear, with a moon almost full. I had come up from the meadow to the edge of the field behind the barn, and stood leaning back upon a short-handled hayfork, looking. It was at everything that I was looking—the moonlight, the gleaming grass, the very stillness, so real and visible it seemed at the falling of this first frost. I was listening too, when, as far away as the stars, it seemed, came the cry of the hounds.

You have heard at night the passing of a train beyond the mountains? the sound of thole-pins round a distant curve in the river? the closing of a barn door somewhere down the valley? Strange it may seem to one who has never listened, but the far-off cry of the hounds is another such friendly and human voice, calling across the vast of the night.

They were coming. How clear their tones, and bell-like! How mellow in the distance, ringing on the rim of the moonlit sky, as round the sides of a swinging silver bell. Their clanging tongues beat all in unison, the sound rising and falling through the rolling woodland, and spreading like a curling wave as the pack broke into the open over the level meadows.

I waited. Rounder, clearer, came the cry. I began to pick out the individual voices as now this one, now that, led the chorus across some mighty measure of

really feel when being chased, namely, not frightened to death, as we commonly think, but perhaps cool and collected, taking the chase as a matter of course, even enjoying it.

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The Chase.³⁰

Was it a twig that broke? Some brittle oak leaf that cracked in the path behind me? A soft sound of feet! Something breathed, stopped, came on—and in the moonlight before me stood the fox!

The dogs were coming, but I was standing still. And who was I, anyway? A stump? A post? No, he saw instantly that I was more than an ordinary post. How much more?

The dogs were coming!

“Well,” said he, as plainly as anything was ever said, “I don’t know what you are. But I will find out.” And up he came and sniffed at my shoes. “This is odd,” he went on, backing carefully off and sitting down on his tail in the edge of a pine-tree shadow. “Odd indeed. Not a stump; not a man, in spite of appearances, for a man could never stand still so long as that.”

The dogs were crashing through the underbrush below, their fierce cries quivering through the very trees about me.

The fox got up, trotted back and forth in front of me for the best possible view, muttering, “Too bad! Too bad! What an infernal nuisance a pack of poodles can make of themselves at times! Here is something new in the woods, and smells of the hen-yard, as I live! Those

³⁰*The Chase*: The sound of the hunting is likened to a chorus of singing voices; the changing sounds, as when the pack emerges from thick woods into open meadow, being likened to the various measures of the musical score; the whole musical composition or chorus being called *The Chase*.

ALONG THE HIGHWAY OF THE FOX

silly dogs!” and trotting back, down the path over which he had just come, he ran directly toward the coming hounds, leaped off into a pile of brush and stones, and vanished as the hounds rushed up in a yelping, panting whirl about me.

Cool? Indeed it was! He probably did not stop, as soon as he was out of sight, and make faces at the whole pack. But that is because they have politer ways in Foxland.

It is no such walking-match as this every time. It is nip and tuck, neck and neck, a dead heat³¹ sometimes, when only his superior knowledge of the ground saves the fox a whole skin.

Perhaps there are peculiar conditions, at times, that are harder for the fox than for the dogs, as when the undergrowth is all adrip with rain or dew, and every jump forward is like a plunge overboard. His red coat is longer than the short, close hair of the hound, and his big brush of a tail, heavy with water, must be a dragging weight over the long hard course of the hunt. If wet fur to him means the same as wet clothes to us, then the narrow escape I witnessed a short time ago is easily explained. It happened in this way:—

I was out in the road by the brook when I caught the cry of the pack; and, hurrying up the hill to the “cut,” I climbed the gravel bank for a view down the road each way, not knowing along which side of the brook the chase was coming, nor where the fox would cross.

³¹*dead heat*: a race between two or more horses or boats where two of the racers come out even, neither winning.

THE FALL OF THE YEAR

Not since the Flood³² had there been a wetter morning. The air could not stir without spilling; the leaves hung weighted with the wet; the very cries of the hounds sounded thick and choking, as the pack floundered through the alder swamp that lay at the foot of the hill where I was waiting.

There must be four or five dogs in the pack, I thought; and surely now they are driving down the old runway that crosses the brook at my meadow.

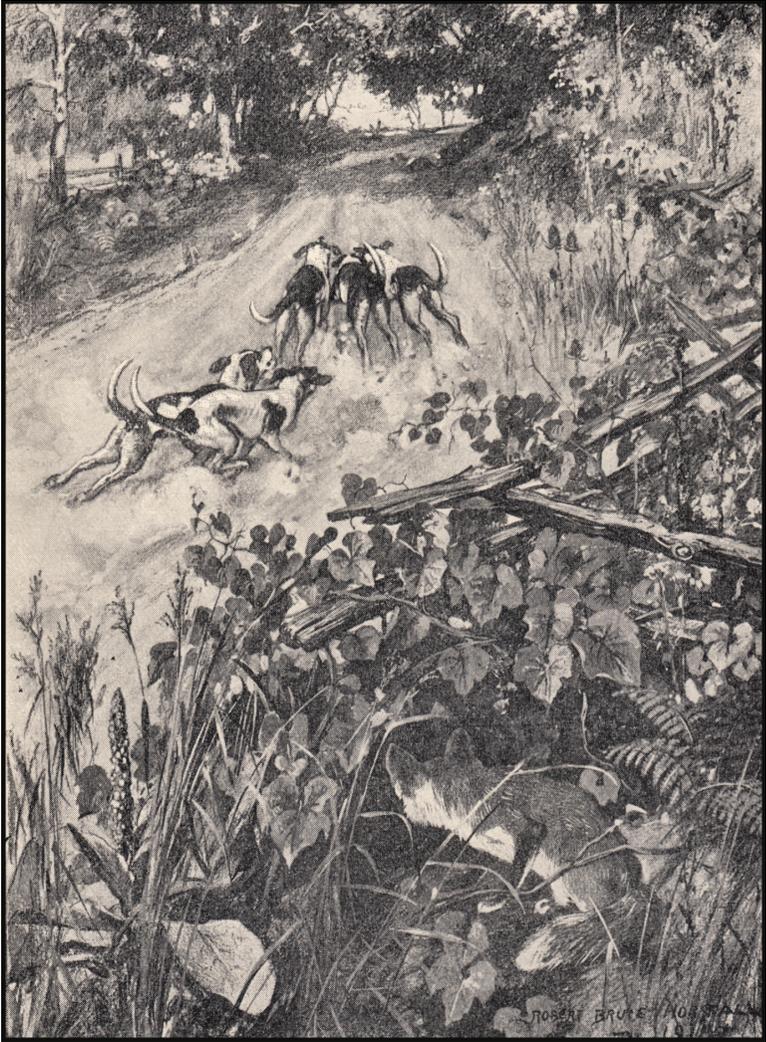
I kept my eye upon the bend in the brook and just beyond the big swamp maple, when there in the open road stood the fox.

He did not stand; he only seemed to, so suddenly and unannounced had he arrived. Not an instant had he to spare. The dogs were smashing through the briars behind him. Leaping into the middle of the road, he flew past me straight up the street, over the ridge, and out of sight.

I turned to see the burst of the pack into the road, when flash! a yellow streak, a rush of feet, a popping of dew-laid dust in the road, and back was the fox, almost into the jaws of the hounds, as he shot into the tangle of wild grapevines around which the panting pack was even then turning!

With a rush that carried them headlong past the grapevines, the dogs struck the warm trail in the road and went up over the hill in a whirlwind of dust and howls.

³²*Flood*: Why spelled with a capital? What flood is meant?



OVER THE HILL IN A WHIRLWIND OF DUST AND HOWLS

THE FALL OF THE YEAR

They were gone. The hunt was over for that day. Somewhere beyond the end of the doubled trail the pack broke up and scattered through the woods, hitting a stale lead here and there, but not one of them, so long as I waited, coming back upon the right track to the grapevines, through whose thick door the hard-pressed fox had so narrowly won his way.³³

³³*hard-pressed fox had narrowly won his way*: In spite of the author's attempt to shoot the fox that was stealing his chickens do you think the author would be glad if there were no foxes in his woods? How do they add interest to his out of doors? What other things besides chickens do they eat? Might it not be that their destruction of woodchucks (for they eat woodchucks) and mice and muskrats quite balances their killing of poultry? (The author thinks so.)