

SHARP DALLAS LORE

THE FALL OF THE YEAR

Dallas Sharp

The Fall of the Year

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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.

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 thistle-down 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.

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 dead 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.

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 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 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.

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 The Chase.

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 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 heat 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.

Not since the Flood 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.

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.

CHAPTER III

IN THE TOADFISH'S SHOE

I WAS winding up my summer vacation with a little fishing party all by myself, on a wharf whose piles stood deep in the swirling waters from Buzzards Bay. My heavy-led line hummed taut in the swift current; my legs hung limp above the water; my back rested comfortably against a great timber that was warm in the September sun. Exciting? Of course not. Fishing is fishing – any kind of fishing is fishing to me. But the kind I am most used to, and the kind I like best, is from the edge of a wharf, where my feet dangle over, where my “throw-out” line hums taut over my finger, in a tide that runs swift and deep and dark below me.

For what may you not catch in such dark waters? And when there are no “bites,” you can sit and wait; and I think that sitting and waiting with my back against a big warm timber is just as much fun now as it used to be when I was a boy.

But after all it is fish that you want when you go fishing; and it is exciting, moreover, just to sit as I was sitting on the wharf, with all the nerves of your body concentrated in the tip of your right forefinger, under the pressure of your line. For how do you know but that the next instant you may get a bite? And how do you know what the fish may be?

When you whip a trout stream for trout – why, you expect trout; when you troll a pond for pickerel, you expect pickerel; but when you sit on a wharf with your line far out in big, deep waters – why, you can expect almost anything – except shoes!

Shoes? Yes, old shoes!

As I sat there on the wharf of Buzzards Bay, there was suddenly a sharp tug at my line. A short quick snap, and I hooked him, and began quickly hauling him in.

How heavily he came! How dead and stupid! Even a flounder or a cod would show more fight than this; and very naturally, for on the end of my line hung an old shoe!

“Well,” I thought, “I have fished for soles, and down on the Savannah I have fished for ‘gators, but I never fished for shoes before”; and taking hold of my big fish (for it must have been a No. 12 shoe), I was about to feel for the hook when I heard a strange grunting noise inside, and nearly tumbled overboard at sight of two big eyes and a monstrous head filling the whole inside of the shoe!

“In the name of Davy Jones!” I yelled, flinging line and shoe and *thing* (whatever it might be) far behind me, “I’ve caught the Old Man of the Sea with his shoe on!” And, scrambling to my feet, I hurried across the wharf to see if it really were a fish that now lay flapping close beside the shoe.

It was really a fish; but it was also a hobgoblin, nightmare, and ooze-croaker! – if you know what that is!

I had never seen a live toadfish before, and it is small wonder that I sighed with relief to see that he had unhooked himself; for he looked not only uncanny, but also dangerous! He was slimy all over, with a tremendous head and a more tremendous mouth (if that could be), with jaws studded on the inside with rows of sharp teeth, and fringed on the outside with folds of loose skin and tentacles. Great glaring eyes stared at me, with ragged bits of skin hanging in a ring about them.

Ugly? Oh, worse than ugly? Two thirds of the monster was head; the rest, a weak, shapeless, slimy something with fins and tail, giving the creature the appearance of one whose brain had grown at the expense of the rest of his body, making him only a kind of living head.

I looked at him. He looked at me, and croaked.

“I don’t understand you,” said I, and he croaked again. “But you are alive,” said I; “and God made you, and therefore you ought not to look so ugly to me,” and he flapped in the burning sun and croaked again.

Stooping quickly, I seized him, crowded him back into the old shoe, and dipped him under water. He gasped with new life and croaked again.

“Now,” said I, “I begin to understand you. That croak means that you are glad to taste salt water again”; and he croaked again, and I dipped him in again.

Then I looked him over thoughtfully. He was about fifteen inches long, brown in color, and coarsely marbled with a darker hue, which ran along the fins in irregular wavy lines.

“You are odd, certainly, and peculiar, and altogether homely,” said I; “but really you are not very ugly. Ugly? No, you are *not* ugly. How could anybody be ugly with a countenance so wise and learned? – so thoughtful and meditative?” And the toadfish croaked and croaked again. And I dipped him in again, and understood him better, and liked him better all the time.

Then I took him in his shoe to the edge of the wharf.

“I am glad to have made your acquaintance, sir,” said I. “If I come this way next summer, I shall look you up; for I want to know more about you. Good-by.” And I heard him croak “Good-by,” as he and his shoe went sailing out and dropped with a splash into the deep dark water of the Bay.

I meant what I said, and the next summer, along the shores of the Bay I hunted him up. He was not in an old shoe this time, but under certain rather large stones that lay just below ebb-tide mark, so that they were usually, though not always, covered with water. Here I found him keeping house; and as I was about to keep house myself, my heart really warmed to him.

I was understanding him more and more, and so I was liking him better and better. Ugly? Wait until I tell you what the dear fellow was doing.

He was keeping house, and he was keeping it all alone! Now listen, for this is what I learned that summer about the strange habits of Mrs. Toadfish, and the handsome behavior of her husband.

It is along in June that the toadfish of our New England bays begin to look round for their summer homes. As far as we now know, it is the female who makes the choice and leaves her future mate to find her and her home. A rock is usually chosen, always in shallow water, and sometimes so far up on the shore that at low tide it is left high and almost dry. The rock may vary in size from one as small as your hat up to the very largest.

Having selected the place for her nest, she digs a pathway down under the rock, and from beneath scoops out a hollow quite large enough to swim round in. This completes the nest, or more properly burrow, in which her little toadfish babies are to be reared.

She now begins to lay the eggs, but not in the sand, as one would suppose; she deliberately pastes them on the under surface of the rock. Just how she does this no one knows.

The eggs are covered with a clear, sticky paste which hardens in contact with water, and is the means by which the mother sticks them fast to the rock. This she must do while swimming on her back, fastening one egg at a time, each close beside its neighbor in regular order, till all the cleared surface of the rock is covered with hundreds of beautiful amber eggs, like drops of pure, clear honey.

The eggs are about the size of buckshot; and, curiously enough, when they hatch, the young come out with their heads all turned in the same direction. Does the mother know which is the head end of the egg? Or has some strange power drawn them around? Or do they turn themselves for some reason?

It will be noticed, in lifting up the rocks, that the heads of the fish are always turned toward the entrance to their nest, through which the light and fresh water come; and it is quite easy to see that these two important things have much to do with the direction in which the little fish are turned.

After Mrs. Fish has finished laying her eggs, her maternal cares are over. She leaves both eggs and cares to the keeping of Mr. Fish, swims off, and crawls into a tin can – or old shoe! – to meditate in sober satisfaction for the rest of the summer.

So it was *she* that I caught, and not the gallant Mr. Toadfish at all! I am glad of it. I have a deal of sympathy and down-right admiration for Mr. Fish. He behaves most handsomely.

However, Mrs. Fish is very wise, and could not leave her treasures in better keeping. If ever there was a faithful parent, it is a Father Toadfish. For three weeks he guards the eggs before they hatch out, and then they are only half hatched; for it has taken the little fish all this time to get out on the top side of the eggs, to which they are still attached by their middles, so that they can move only their heads and tails.

They continue to wiggle in this fashion for some weeks, until the yolk of the egg is absorbed, and they have grown to be nearly half an inch long. They are then free from the rock and swim off, looking as much like their parents as children can, and every bit as ugly.

Ugly? Did I say ugly? Is a baby ever ugly to its mother? Or a baby toadfish to its father? No. You cannot love a baby and at the same time see it ugly. You cannot love the out of doors with all your *mind* as well as with all your heart, and ever see it ugly.

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