

SHARP DALLAS LORE

WINTER

Dallas Sharp

Winter

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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.

CHAPTER I

HUNTING THE SNOW

You 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

The 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 had caught them here in the backwoods and held them; and now, with the sudden shift of the wind again to the north, it threatened to delay them farther, past all chance of bringing a single turkey through alive.

But George and Herbert Totman had not worked their way into their junior year at college to sit down by the roadside while there was light to travel by. They were not the kind to let their turkeys go to roost before sundown. It was a slow and solemn procession that moved through the woods, but it moved – toward a goal that they had set for that day's travel.

All day, at long intervals, as they had pushed along the deep forest road, the muffled rumble of distant trains had come to them through the silence; and now, although neither of them had mentioned it, they were determined to get out somewhere near the tracks before the night and the storm should settle down upon them. Their road, hardly more here than a wide trail, must cross the railroad tracks, as they remembered it, not more than two or three miles ahead.

Leaving more and more of the desolate forest behind them with every step, they plodded doggedly on. But there was so much of the same desolate forest still before them! Yet yonder, and not far away, was the narrow path of the iron track through the interminable waste; something human – the very sight of it enough to warm and cheer them. They would camp to-night where they could see a train go by.

The leaden sky lowered closer upon them. The storm had not yet got under full headway, but the fine icy flakes were flying faster, slanting farther, and the wind was beginning to drone through the trees.

Without a halt, the flock moved on through the thickening storm. But the dog was having all that he could do to keep the stragglers in order; and George, in the rear, saw that they must stir the flock, for the birds were gradually falling back into a thick bunch before him.

Hurrying back to the wagon, he got two loaves of bread, and ran ahead with them to Herbert. The famished turkeys seemed to know what he carried, and broke into a run after him. For half a mile they kept up the gait, as both boys, trotting along the road, dropped pieces of bread on the snow.

Then the whole game had to be repeated; for the greater part of the flock, falling hopelessly behind, soon forgot what they were running after, and began to cry, "*Quint! quint! quint!*" – the roosting-cry! So, starting again in the rear with the bread, George carried the last of the flock forward for another good run.

"We should win this game," Herbert panted, "if we only had loaves enough to make a few more touch-downs."

"There's half an hour yet to play," was George's answer.

"But what on?"

"Oh, on our nerve now," the older boy replied grimly.

"That railroad is not far ahead," said Herbert.

"Half an hour ahead. We've got to camp by that track to-night or –"

"Or what?"

But George had turned to help the dog head off some runaways.

Herbert, picking up a lump of frozen leaves and snow, began to break this in front of the flock to tole them on.

He had hardly started the birds again, when a long-legged gobbler brushed past him and went swinging down the road, calling, “*Quint! quint! quint!*” to the flock behind. The call was taken up and passed along the now extended line, which, breaking immediately into double-quick, went streaming after him.

Herbert got out of the way to let them pass, too astonished for a moment to do more than watch them go. It was the roosting-cry! An old gobbler had given it; but as it was taking him, for once, in the right direction, Herbert ordered back the dog that had dashed forward to head him off, and fell in with George to help on the stragglers in the rear.

As the laggards were brought up to a slight rise in the road, the flock was seen a hundred yards ahead, gathered in a dark mass about a telegraph-pole! It could be nothing else, for through the whirling snow the big cross-arms stood out, dim but unmistakable.

It was this that the gobbler had spied and started for, this sawed and squared piece of timber, that had suggested a barnyard to him, – corn and roost, – as to the boys it meant a human presence in the forest and something like human companionship.

It was after four o’clock now, and the night was hard upon them. The wind was strengthening every minute; the snow was coming finer and swifter. The boys’ worst fears about the storm were beginning to be realized.

But the sight of the railroad track heartened them. The strong-armed poles, with their humming wires, reached out hands of hope to them; and getting among the turkeys, they began to hurry them off the track and down the steep embankment, which fortunately offered them here some slight protection from the wind. But as fast as they pushed the birds off, the one-minded things came back on the track. The whole flock, meanwhile, was scattering up and down the iron rails and settling calmly down upon them for the night.

They were going to roost upon the track! The railroad bank shelved down to the woods on each side, and along its whitened peak lay the two black rails like ridge-poles along the length of a long roof. In the thick half-light of the whirling snow, the turkeys seemed suddenly to find themselves at home: and as close together as they could crowd, with their breasts all to the storm, they arranged themselves in two long lines upon the steel rails.

And nothing could move them! As fast as one was tossed down the bank, up he came. Starting down the lines, the boys pushed and shoved to clear the track; but the lines re-formed behind them quickly, evenly, and almost without a sound. As well try to sweep back the waves of the sea! They worked together to collect a small band of the birds and drive them into the edge of the woods; but every time the band dwindled to a single turkey that dodged between their legs toward its place on the roost. The two boys could have kept *two* turkeys off the rails, but not five hundred.

“The game is up, George,” said Herbert, as the sickening thought of a passing train swept over him.

The words were hardly uttered when there came the *tankle, tankle* of the big cow-bell hanging from the collar of the horse, that was just now coming up to the crossing!

George caught his breath and started over to stop the horse, when, above the loud hum of the wires and the sound of the wind in the forest trees, they heard through the storm the muffled whistle of a locomotive.

“Quick! The horse, Herbert! Hitch him to a tree and come!” called George, as he dived into the wagon and pulled out their lantern. “Those birds could wreck the train!” he shouted, and hurried forward along the track with his lighted lantern in his hand.

It was not the thought of the turkeys, but the thought of the people on the flying Montreal express, – if that it was, – that sped him up the track. In his imagination he saw the wreck of a ditched train below him; the moans of a hundred mangled beings he heard sounding in his ears!

On into the teeth of the blinding storm he raced, while he strained his eyes for a glimpse of the coming train.

The track seemed to lie straightaway in front of him, and he bent his head for a moment before the wind, when, out of the smother of the snow, the flaring headlight leaped almost upon him.

He sprang aside, stumbled, and pitched headlong down the bank, as the engine of a freight, with a roar that dazed him, swept past.

But the engineer had seen him, and there was a screaming of iron brakes, a crashing of cars together, and a long-drawn shrieking of wheels, as the heavy train slid along the slippery rails to a stop.

As the engineer swung down from his cab, he was met, to his great astonishment, by a dozen turkeys clambering up the embankment toward him. He had plowed his way well among the roosting flock and brushed them unhurt from the rails as the engine skidded along to its slow stop.

By this time the conductor and the train-hands had run forward to see what it all meant, and stood looking at the strange obstruction on the track, when Herbert came into the glare of the headlight and joined them. Then George came panting up, and the boys tried to explain the situation. But their explanation only made a case of sheer negligence out of what at first had seemed a mystery to the trainmen. Both the engineer and the conductor were anxious and surly. Their train was already an hour late; there was a through express behind, and the track must be cleared at once.

And they fell at once to clearing it – conductor, fireman, brakemen, and the two boys. Those railroad men had never tried to clear a track of roosting turkeys before. They cleared it, – a little of it, – but it would not stay cleared, for the turkeys slipped through their hands, squeezed between their legs, ducked about their heels, and got back into place. Finally the conductor, putting two men in line on each rail, ordered the engineer to follow slowly, close upon their heels, with the train, as they scattered the birds before them.

The boys had not once thought of themselves. They had had no time to think of anything but the danger and the delay that they had caused. They helped with all their might to get the train through, and as they worked, silently listened to the repeated threats of the conductor.

At last, with a muttered something, the conductor kicked one of the turkeys into a fluttering heap beneath the engine, and, turning, commanded his crew to stand aside and let the engineer finish the rest of the flock.

The men got away from the track. Then, catching Herbert by the arm, George pointed along the train, and bending, made a tossing motion toward the top of the cars.

“Quick!” he whispered. “One on every car!” and stepping calmly back in front of the engine, he went down the opposite side of the long train.

As he passed the tender, he seized a big gobbler, and sent him with a wild throw up to the top of a low coal-car, just as Herbert, on his side, sent another fluttering up to the same perch. Both birds landed with a flap and a gobble that were heard by the other turkeys up and down the length of the train.

Instantly came a chorus of answering gobbles as every turkey along the track saw, in the failing light, that real, buildings – farmyard buildings – were here to roost on! And into the air they went, helped all along the train by the two boys, who were tossing them into the cars, or upon the loads of lumber, as fast as they could pass from car to car.

Luckily, the rails were sleety, and the mighty driving-wheels, spinning on the ice with their long load, which seemed to freeze continually to the track, made headway so slowly that the whole flock had come to roost upon the cars before the train was fairly moving.

Conductor and brakeman, hurrying back to board the caboose, were midway of the train before they noticed what was happening. *How* it was happening they did not see at all, so hidden were the movements of the two boys in the swirl of the blinding snow.

For just an instant the conductor checked himself. But it was too late to do anything. The train was moving, and he must keep it moving as fast as he could to the freight-yards ahead at the junction – the very yards where, even now, an empty car was waiting for the overdue turkeys.

As he ran on down the track and swung aboard the caboose, two other figures closed in behind the train. One of them, seizing the other by the arm, landed him safe upon the steps, and then shouted at him through the storm: —

“Certainly you shall! I’m safe enough! I’ll drive on to that old sawmill to-night. Feed ’em in the morning and wait for me! Good-by,” and as the wind carried his voice away, George Totman found himself staring after a ghost-white car that had vanished in the storm.

He was alone; but the thought of the great flock speeding on to the town ahead was company enough. Besides, he had too much to do, and to do quickly, to think of himself; for the snow was blocking his road, and the cold was getting at him. But how the wires overhead sang to him! How the sounding forest sang to him as he went back to give the horse a snatch of supper!

He was soon on the road, where the wind at his back and the tall trees gave him protection. The four-wheeled wagon pulled hard through the piling snow, but the horse had had an easy day, and George kept him going until, toward eight o’clock, he drew up behind a lofty pile of slabs and sawdust at the old mill.

A wilder storm never filled the resounding forests of the North. The old mill was far from being proof against the fine, icy snow; but when George rolled himself in his heavy blanket and lay down beside his dog, it was to go to sleep to the comfortable munching of the horse, and with the thought that Herbert and the turkeys were safe.

And they were safe. It was late in the afternoon the next day when George, having left the wagon at the mill, came floundering behind the horse through the unbroken road into the streets of the junction, to find Herbert anxiously waiting for him, and the turkeys, with full crops, trying hard to go to roost inside their double-decked car.

CHAPTER III

WHITE-FOOT

The December rain was falling down, down, down, as if the drops were lead instead of water. The December sky, if you could call it sky, had settled down, down, down, as if it too were of lead, and were being propped up only by the tops of the stiff bare trees.

A green stick in the fireplace behind me sizzled and sputtered and blew its small steam whistles to warn me away from the window, – from the sight of the naked trees, and the cold, thick fog upon the meadow, and the blur of the pine woods beyond, and the rain falling down, down, down.

A dreary world out of doors surely, with not a sign of life! The pine tree, rising up above the hillside in front of the window, was green, but only a few lifeless leaves rattled among the middle branches of the oaks, while up in the stark top of a hickory sapling was wedged a robin's nest, deserted and wet and going to pieces.

I shivered, in spite of the hearth-fire behind me, for the face of the gray gloom pressed close up against the window outside. And the empty robin's nest, already a ruin! its mud walls broken, its tiny timbers hanging loose in the rain!

But what a large nest for a robin, I thought; and how strangely peaked and pointed it is, like a little haystack! Then all at once, inside of me, and all over me, I felt a warm, delightful feeling.

"It isn't possible," said I aloud, but all to myself; "it isn't possible that little White-Foot has moved into that old robin's nest and fitted it up with a peaked roof for the winter?"

And the thought of it started the warm, delightful feeling again inside of me and all over me; and snatching up the tongs by the fireplace I ran out into the December rain and tapped a few times on the slender hickory sapling.

And what do you think happened?

It stopped raining?

No.

You broke your tongs?

No.

The nest fell out and hit you on the head?

No.

You ran back into the house again out of the rain?

Yes, I did, and I went straight to the window and looked out again at the robin's nest, – my deserted, ruined robin's nest, with its thick thatch of waterproof cedar bark, with its little round door-hole in the side, with its soft furry bed, all toasty warm, out of which with my tapping tongs I had just roused White-Foot and brought him sleepy-eyed to look down at me from his door.

The rain continued to fall down; but my spirits went up, and up, at the thought of that little mouse all safe and warm for the winter in Robin's deserted nest.

And so, if "there are no birds in last year's nest," as mourns a doleful poem, you need not be sad on that account, for if you look closely, you may find, now and then, a mouse in last year's nest – and who will say that finding a mouse in a bird's nest is not almost as interesting as finding a bird there?

A robin's nest in the winter-time would be the wettest, muddiest, coldest place in the world for a robin; but a mouse can take that old robin's nest and turn it into a snuggery (if you know what a "snuggery" is) so cozy and warm that neither the tip of Mr. Mouse's sharp nose, nor the tip of his thin ears, nor the tippy-tip of his long bare tail ever feels one sharp nip of the cold outside.

So, if there are no birds in last year's nest (as surely there ought not to be), take your tongs and tap, or, better, climb up, and reach gently into the nest with your finger, for a mouse may be waiting inside to bite you, – and that would be interesting.

For a mouse is interesting – just as interesting in his mousy ways as a whale in his whalish ways, or a robin in his ways. Can you name anything that does not grow interesting as soon as you begin to watch and study it? Large things, small things, Bengal tigers or earthworms – all things will surprise and interest you if you will study them for a season.

I have a friend, for instance, who has shot more tigers, in more lands, than any other living man; who knows more about tiger habits and the tempers of the dangerous beasts than any other man; and who, as I am writing this, is himself writing a book which is to be called “Tiger Lands.” That will be an exciting book, no doubt, for he has had adventures that made my hair stand up on my head, just to hear about. Yet I very much doubt if that book, with all its man-eaters, will be any more interesting or any more valuable to us than Darwin’s book on earthworms.

So am I going to sigh because there are no birds in last year’s nests? Had the poem said, “there are no *mice* in last year’s nests,” that might have made me sad, perhaps; though I am sure that I could go into the woods almost any winter day and find plenty of old *stumps* with mice in them. And I am equally sure that there will be plenty of birds in next summer’s nests; so, until the robins come back and build new nests, I am going to look out of the window these dark December days, and think of White-Foot in Robin’s old nest, high up there in the slender sapling, where no cat can climb to him, and where no crow will dare come to tear his house to pieces.

There he will swing in the winter gales with the snow swirling around and beneath him; there he will dream through the rain and the slanting sleet when his high sapling stairway is coated with ice and impossible for him to climb; there he will live, and whenever I thump with the tongs at his outer gate, up there in the little round doorway will appear his head – his eyes, I should say, for he looks all eyes up there, so large, so black, so innocent, so inquiring are they, so near to rolling off down the tip of his nose with sheer surprise.

I shall have many a cheering glimpse of White-Foot, many a comforting thought of him, out there, his thatch snow-covered, his thick-walled nest in the slender hickory riding the winter seas that sweep the hilltop, as safe as the ships anchored yonder in the landlocked harbor; and he will be much more comforting to me out there than here in the house with me; for, strangely enough, while White-Foot never seems to join the common mice in the barn, never a winter goes by without one or more of his kind coming into the house for the cold weather.

This would be very pleasant if they could keep out of the pop-corn and the nuts and the apples and the linen-drawers. But only recently one got into the linen in the china-closet, and *chewed together* the loveliest damask nest that any being ever slept in.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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