

# SHARP DALLAS LORE

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Dallas Sharp

**The Lay of the Land**

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# **Dallas Lore Sharp**

## **The Lay of the Land**

### **I**

### **The Muskrats are Building**

We have had a series of long, heavy rains, and water is standing over the swampy meadow. It is a dreary stretch, this wet, sedgy land in the cold twilight, drearier than any part of the woods or the upland pastures. They are empty, but the meadow is flat and wet, naked and all unsheltered. And a November night is falling.

The darkness deepens. A raw wind is rising. At nine o'clock the moon swings round and full to the crest of the ridge, and pours softly over. I button the heavy ulster close, and in my rubber boots go down to the river and follow it out to the middle of the meadow, where it meets the main ditch at the sharp turn toward the swamp. Here at the bend, behind a clump of black alders, I sit quietly down and wait.

I am not mad, nor melancholy; I am not after copy. Nothing is the matter with me. I have come out to the bend to watch the muskrats building, for that small mound up the ditch is not an old haycock, but a half-finished muskrat house.

The moon climbs higher. The water on the meadow shivers in the light. The wind bites through my heavy coat and sends me back, but not until I have seen one, two, three little figures scaling the walls of the house with loads of mud-and-reed mortar. I am driven back by the cold, but not until I know that here in the desolate meadow is being rounded off a lodge, thick-walled and warm, and proof against the longest, bitterest of winters.

This is near the end of November. My wood is in the cellar; I am about ready to put on the double windows and storm doors; and the muskrats' house is all but finished. Winter is at hand: but we are prepared, the muskrats even better prepared than I, for theirs is an adequate house, planned perfectly.

Throughout the summer they had no house, only their tunnels into the sides of the ditch, their roadways out into the grass, and their beds under the tussocks or among the roots of the old stumps. All these months the water had been low in the ditch, and the beds among the tussocks had been safe and dry enough.

Now the autumnal rains have filled river and ditch, flooded the tunnels, and crept up into the beds under the tussocks. Even a muskrat will creep out of his bed when cold, wet water creeps in. What shall he do for a house? He does not want to leave his meadow. The only thing to do is to build, – move from under the tussock, out upon the top, and here, in the deep, wiry grass, make a new bed, high and dry above the rising water, and close the new bed in with walls that circle and dome and defy the winter.

Such a house will require a great deal of work to build. Why not combine, make it big enough to hold half a dozen, save labor and warmth, and, withal, live sociably together? So they left, each one his bed, and joining efforts, started, about the middle of October, to build this winter house.

Slowly, night after night, the domed walls have been rising, although for several nights at a time there would be no apparent progress with the work. The builders were in no hurry, it seems; the cold was far off; but it is coming, and to-night it feels near and keen. And to-night there is no loafing about the lodge.

When this house is done, then the rains may descend, and the floods come, but it will not fall. It is built upon a tussock; and a tussock, you will know, who have ever grubbed at one, has hold on the

bottom of creation. The winter may descend, and the boys, and foxes, come, – and they will come, but not before the walls are frozen, – yet the house stands. It is boy-proof, almost; it is entirely rain-, cold-, and fox-proof. Many a time I have hacked at its walls with my axe when fishing through the ice, but I never got in. I have often seen, too, where the fox has gone round and round the house in the snow, and where, at places, he has attempted to dig into the frozen mortar; but it was a foot thick, as hard as flint, and utterly impossible for his pick and shovel.

Yet strangely enough the house sometimes fails of the very purpose for which it was erected. I said the floods may come. So they may, ordinarily; but along in March when one comes as a freshet, it rises sometimes to the dome of the house, filling the single bedchamber and drowning the dwellers out. I remember a freshet once in the end of February that flooded Lupton's Pond and drove the muskrats of the whole pond village to their ridgepoles, to the bushes, and to whatever wreckage the waters brought along.

The best laid schemes o' *muskrats* too  
Gang aft a-gley.

But ganging a-gley is not the interesting thing, not the point with my muskrats: it is rather that my muskrats, and the mice that Burns ploughed up, the birds and the bees, and even the very trees of the forest, have foresight. They all look ahead and provide against the coming cold. That a mouse, or a muskrat, or even a bee, should occasionally prove foresight to be vain, only shows that the life of the fields is very human. Such foresight, however, oftener proves entirely adequate for the winter, dire as some of the emergencies are sure to be.

The north wind doth blow,  
And we shall have snow,  
And what will Robin do then,  
Poor thing?

And what will Muskrat do? and Chipmunk? and Whitefoot? and little Chickadee? poor things! Never fear. Robin has heard the trumpets of the north wind and is retreating leisurely toward the south, wise thing! Muskrat is building a warm winter lodge; Chipmunk has already dug his but and ben, and so far down under the stone wall that a month of zeros could not break in; Whitefoot, the woodmouse, has stored the hollow poplar stub full of acorns, and has turned Robin's deserted nest, near by, into a cosy house; and Chickadee, dear thing, Nature herself looks after him. There are plenty of provisions for the hunting, and a big piece of suet on my lilac bush. His clothes are warm, and he will hide his head under his wing in the elm-tree hole when the north wind doth blow, and never mind the weather.

I shall not mind it either, not so much, anyway, on account of Chickadee. He lends me a deal of support. So do Chipmunk, Whitefoot, and Muskrat.

This lodge of my muskrats in the meadow makes a difference, I am sure, of at least ten degrees in the mean temperature of my winter. How can the out-of-doors freeze entirely up with such a house as this at the middle of it? For in this house is life, warm life, – and fire. On the coldest day I can look out over the bleak white waste to where the house shows, a tiny mound in the snow, and I can see the fire burn, just as I can see and feel the glow when I watch the slender blue wraith rise into the still air from the chimney of the old farmhouse along the road below. For I share in the life of both houses; and not less in the life of the mud house of the meadow, because, instead of Swedes, they are muskrats who live there. I can share the existence of a muskrat? Easily. I like to curl up with the three or four of them in that mud house and there spend the worst days of the winter. My own big house here on the hilltop is sometimes cold. And the wind! If sometimes I could only drive the insistent

winter wind from the house corners! But down in the meadow the house has no corners; the mud walls are thick, so thick and round that the shrieking wind sweeps past unheard, and all unheeded the cold creeps over and over the thatch, then crawls back and stiffens upon the meadow.

The doors of our house in the meadow swing open the winter through. Just outside the doors stand our stacks of fresh calamus roots, and iris, and arum. The roof of the universe has settled close and hard upon us, – a sheet of ice extending from the ridge of the house far out to the shores of the meadow. The winter is all above the roof – outside. It blows and snows and freezes out there. In here, beneath the ice-roof, the roots of the sedges are pink and tender; our roads are all open and they run every way, over all the rich, rooty meadow.

The muskrats are building. Winter is coming. The muskrats are making preparations, but not they alone. The preparation for hard weather is to be seen everywhere, and it has been going on ever since the first flocking of the swallows back in July. Up to that time the season still seemed young; no one thought of harvest, of winter; – when there upon the telegraph wires one day were the swallows, and work against the winter had commenced.

The great migratory movements of the birds, mysterious in some of their courses as the currents of the sea, were in the beginning, and are still, for the most part, mere shifts to escape the cold. Why in the spring these same birds should leave the southern lands of plenty and travel back to the hungrier north to nest, is not easily explained. Perhaps it is the home instinct that draws them back; for home to birds (and men) is the land of the nest. However, it is very certain that among the autumn migrants there would be at once a great falling off should there come a series of warm open winters with abundance of food.

Bad as the weather is, there are a few of the seed-eating birds, like the quail, and some of the insect-eaters, like the chickadee, who are so well provided for that they can stay and survive the winter. But the great majority of the birds, because they have no storehouse nor barn, must take wing and fly away from the lean and hungry cold.

And I am glad to see them go. The thrilling honk of the flying wild geese out of the November sky tells me that the hollow forests and closing bays of the vast desolate north are empty now, except for the few creatures that find food and shelter in the snow. The wild geese pass, and I hear behind them the clang of the arctic gates, the boom of the bolt – then the long frozen silence. Yet it is not for long. Soon the bar will slip back, the gates will swing wide, and the wild geese will come honking over, swift to the greening marshes of the arctic bays once more.

Here in my own small woods and marshes there is much getting ready, much comforting assurance that Nature is quite equal to herself, that winter is not approaching unawares. There will be great lack, no doubt, before there is plenty again; there will be suffering and death. But what with the migrating, the strange deep sleeping, the building and harvesting, there will be also much comfortable, much joyous and sociable living.

Long before the muskrats began to build, even before the swallows commenced to flock, my chipmunks started their winter stores. I don't know which began his work first, which kept harder at it, chipmunk or the provident ant. The ant has come by a reputation for thrift, which, though entirely deserved, is still not the exceptional virtue it is made to seem. Chipmunk is just as thrifty. So is the busy bee. It is the thought of approaching winter that keeps the bee busy far beyond her summer needs. Much of her labor is entirely for the winter. By the first of August she has filled the brood chamber with honey – forty pounds of it, enough for the hatching bees and for the whole colony until the willows tassel again. But who knows what the winter may be? How cold and long drawn out into the coming May? So the harvesting is pushed with vigor on to the flowering of the last autumn asters – on until fifty, a hundred, or even three hundred pounds of surplus honey are sealed in the combs, and the colony is safe should the sun not shine again for a year and a day.

But here is Nature, in these extra pounds of honey, making preparation for me, incapable drone that I am. I could not make a drop of honey from a whole forest of linden bloom. Yet I must live, so

I give the bees a bigger gum log than they need; I build them greater barns; and when the harvest is all in, this extra store I make my own. I too with the others am getting ready for the cold.

It is well that I am. The last of the asters have long since gone; so have the witch-hazels. All is quiet about the hives. The bees have formed into their warm winter clusters upon the combs, and except “when come the calm, mild days,” they will fly no more until March or April. I will contract their entrances, – put on their storm-doors. And now there is little else that I can do but put on my own.

The whole of my out-of-doors is a great hive, stored and sealed for the winter, its swarming life close-clustered, and covering in its centre, as coals in the ashes, the warm life-fires of summer.

I stand along the edge of the hillside here and look down the length of its frozen slope. The brown leaves have drifted into the entrances, as if every burrow were forsaken; sand and sticks have washed in, too, littering and choking the doorways.

There is no sign of life. A stranger would find it hard to believe that my whole drove of forty-six ground hogs (woodchucks) are gently snoring at the bottoms of these old uninteresting holes. Yet here they are, and quite out of danger, sleeping the sleep of the furry, the fat, and the forgetful.

The woodchuck’s is a curious shift, a case of Nature outdoing herself. Winter spreads far and fast, and Woodchuck, in order to keep ahead out of danger, would need wings. But he wasn’t given any. Must he perish then? Winter spreads far, but does not go deep – down only about four feet; and Woodchuck, if he cannot escape overland, can, perhaps, *underland*. So down he goes *through* the winter, down into a mild and even temperature, five long feet away – but as far away from the snow and cold as Bobolink among the reeds of the distant Orinoco.

Indeed, Woodchuck’s is a farther journey and even more wonderful than Bobolink’s, for these five feet carry him beyond the bounds of time and space into the mysterious realm of sleep, of suspended life, to the very gates of death. That he will return with Bobolink, that he will come up alive with the spring out of this dark way, is very strange.

For he went in most meagrely prepared. He took nothing with him, apparently. The muskrat built him a house, and under the spreading ice turned all the meadow into a well-stocked cellar. The beaver built a dam, cut and anchored under water a plenty of green sticks near his lodge, so that he too would be under cover when the ice formed, and have an abundance of tender bark at hand. Chipmunk spent half of his summer laying up food near his underground nest. But Woodchuck simply dug him a hole, a grave, then ate until no particle more of fat could be got into his baggy hide, and then crawled into his tomb, gave up the ghost, and waited the resurrection of the spring.

This is his shift! This is the length to which he goes, because he has no wings, and because he cannot cut, cure, and mow away in the depths of the stony hillside, enough clover hay to last him over the winter. The beaver cans his fresh food in cold water; the chipmunk selects long-keeping things and buries them; the woodchuck makes of himself a silo, eats all his winter hay in the summer while it is green, turns it at once into a surplus of himself, then buries that self, feeds upon it, and sleeps – and lives!

The north wind doth blow,  
And we shall have snow,

but what good reason is there for our being daunted at the prospect? Robin and all the others are well prepared. Even the wingless frog, who is also lacking in fur and feathers and fat, even he has no care at the sound of the cold winds. Nature provides for him too, in her way, which is neither the way for the robin, the muskrat, nor the woodchuck. He survives, and all he has to do about it is to dig into the mud at the bottom of the ditch. This looks at first like the journey Woodchuck takes. But it is really a longer, stranger journey than Woodchuck’s, for it takes the frog far beyond the realms of mere sleep, on into the cold, black land where no one can tell the quick from the dead.



The frost may or may not reach him here in the ooze. No matter. If the cold works down and freezes him into the mud, he never knows. But he will thaw out as good as new; he will sing again for joy and love as soon as his heart warms up enough to beat.

I have seen frogs frozen into the middle of solid lumps of ice in the laboratory. Drop the lump on the floor, and the frog would break out like a fragment of the ice itself. And this has happened more than once to the same frog without causing him the least apparent suffering or inconvenience. He would come to, and croak, and look as wise as ever.

The north wind *may* blow,

but the muskrats are building; and it is by no means a cheerless prospect, this wood-and-meadow world of mine in the gray November light. The frost will not fall to-night as falls the plague on men; the brightness of the summer is gone, yet this chill gloom is not the sombre shadow of a pall. Nothing is dying in the fields: the grass-blades are wilting, the old leaves are falling, but no square foot of greensward will the winter kill, nor a single tree perhaps in my woodlot. There will be no less of life next April because of this winter, unless, perchance, conditions altogether exceptional starve some of the winter birds. These suffer most; yet as the seasons go, life even for the winter birds is comfortable and abundant.

The fence-rows and old pastures are full of berries that will keep the fires burning in the quail and partridge during the bitterest weather. Last February, however, I came upon two partridges in the snow, dead of hunger and cold. It was after an extremely long severe spell. But this was not all. These two birds since fall had been feeding regularly in the dried fodder corn that stood shocked over the field. One day all the corn was carted away. The birds found their supply of food suddenly cut off, and, unused to foraging the fence-rows and tangles for wild seeds, they seem to have given up the struggle at once, although within easy reach of plenty.

Hardly a minute's flight away was a great thicket of dwarf sumac covered with berries; there were bayberries, rose hips, green brier, bittersweet, black alder, and checkerberries – hillsides of the latter – that they might have found. These were hard fare, doubtless, after an unstinted supply of sweet corn; but still they were plentiful, and would have been sufficient had the birds made use of them.

The smaller birds of the winter, like the tree sparrow and junco, feed upon the weeds and grasses that ripen unmolested along the roadsides and waste places. A mixed flock of these small birds lived several days last winter upon the seeds of the ragweed in my mowing. The weeds came up in the early fall after the field was laid down to clover and timothy. They threatened to choke out the grass. I looked at them, rising shoulder-high and seedy over the greening field, and thought with dismay of how they would cover it by the next fall. After a time the snow came, a foot and a half of it, till only the tops of the seedy ragweeds showed above the level white; then the juncos, goldfinches, and tree sparrows came, and there was a five-day shucking of ragweed-seed in the mowing, and five days of life and plenty.

Then I looked and thought again – that, perhaps, into the original divine scheme of things were put even ragweeds. But then, perhaps, there was no original divine scheme of things. I don't know. As I watch the changing seasons, however, across the changeless years, I seem to find a scheme, a plan, a purpose, and there are weeds and winters in it, and it seems divine.

The muskrats are building; the last of the migrating geese have gone over; the wild mice have harvested their acorns; the bees have clustered; the woodchucks are asleep; and the sap in the big hickory by the side of the house has crept down out of reach of the fingers of the frost. I will put on the storm-doors and the double windows. Even now the logs are blazing cheerily on the wide, warm hearth.

## II

### Christmas in the Woods

On the night before this particular Christmas every creature of the woods that could stir was up and stirring, for over the old snow was falling swiftly, silently, a soft, fresh covering that might mean a hungry Christmas unless the dinner were had before morning.

But when the morning dawned, a cheery Christmas sun broke across the great gum swamp, lighting the snowy boles and soft-piled limbs of the giant trees with indescribable glory, and pouring, a golden flood, into the deep spongy bottoms below. It would be a perfect Christmas in the woods, clear, mild, stirless, with silent footing for me, and everywhere the telltale snow.

And everywhere the Christmas spirit, too. As I paused among the pointed cedars of the pasture, looking down into the cripple at the head of the swamp, a clear wild whistle rang in the thicket, followed by a flash through the alders like a tongue of fire, as a cardinal grosbeak shot down to the tangle of greenbrier and magnolia under the slope. It was a fleck of flaming summer. As warm as summer, too, the stag-horn sumac burned on the crest of the ridge against the group of holly trees, – trees as fresh as April, and all aglow with berries. The woods were decorated for the holy day. The gentleness of the soft new snow touched everything; cheer and good-will lighted the unclouded sky and warmed the thick depths of the evergreens, and blazed in the crimson-berried bushes of the ilex and alder. The Christmas woods were glad.

Nor was the gladness all show, mere decoration. There was real cheer in abundance, for I was back in the old home woods, back along the Cohansey, back where you can pick persimmons off the trees at Christmas. There are persons who say the Lord might have made a better berry than the strawberry, but He didn't. Perhaps He didn't make the strawberry at all. But He did make the Cohansey Creek persimmon, and He made it as good as He could. Nowhere else under the sun can you find such persimmons as these along the creek, such richness of flavor, such gummy, candied quality, woodsy, wild, crude, – especially the fruit of two particular trees on the west bank, near Lupton's Pond. But they never come to this perfection, never quite lose their pucker, until midwinter, – as if they had been intended for the Christmas table of the woods.

It had been nearly twenty years since I crossed this pasture of the cedars on my way to the persimmon trees. The cows had been crossing every year, yet not a single new crook had they worn in the old paths. But I was half afraid as I came to the fence where I could look down upon the pond and over to the persimmon trees. Not one of the Luptons, who owned pasture and pond and trees, had ever been a boy, so far as I could remember, or had ever eaten of those persimmons. Would they have left the trees through all these years?

I pushed through the hedge of cedars and stopped for an instant, confused. The very pond was gone! and the trees! No, there was the pond, – but how small the patch of water! and the two persimmon trees? The bush and undergrowth had grown these twenty years. Which way? Ah, there they stand, only their leafless tops showing; but see the hard angular limbs, how closely globed with fruit! how softly etched upon the sky!

I hurried around to the trees and climbed the one with the two broken branches, up, clear up to the top, into the thick of the persimmons.

Did I say it had been twenty years? That could not be. Twenty years would have made me a man, and this sweet, real taste in my mouth only a *boy* could know. But there was college, and marriage, a Massachusetts farm, four boys of my own, and – no matter! it could not have been *years*– twenty years – since. It was only yesterday that I last climbed this tree and ate the rich rimy fruit frosted with a Christmas snow.

And yet, could it have been yesterday? It was storming, and I clung here in the swirling snow and heard the wild ducks go over in their hurry toward the bay. Yesterday, and all this change in the vast treetop world, this huddled pond, those narrowed meadows, that shrunken creek! I should have eaten the persimmons and climbed straight down, not stopped to gaze out upon the pond, and away over the dark ditches to the creek. But reaching out quickly I gathered another handful, – and all was yesterday again.

I filled both pockets of my coat and climbed down. I kept those persimmons and am tasting them to-night. Lupton's Pond may fill to a puddle, the meadows may shrivel, the creek dry up and disappear, and old Time may even try his wiles on me. But I shall foil him to the end; for I am carrying still in my pocket some of yesterday's persimmons, – persimmons that ripened in the rime of a winter when I was a boy.

High and alone in a bare persimmon tree for one's dinner hardly sounds like a merry Christmas. But I was not alone. I had noted the fresh tracks beneath the tree before I climbed up, and now I saw that the snow had been partly brushed from several of the large limbs as the 'possum had moved about in the tree for his Christmas dinner. We were guests at the same festive board, and both of us at Nature's invitation. It mattered not that the 'possum had eaten and gone this hour or more. Such is good form in the woods. He was expecting me, so he came early, out of modesty, and, that I too might be entirely at my ease, he departed early, leaving his greetings for me in the snow.

Thus I was not alone; here was good company and plenty of it. I never lack a companion in the woods when I can pick up a trail. The 'possum and I ate together. And this was just the fellowship I needed, this sharing the persimmons with the 'possum. I had broken bread, not with the 'possum only, but with all the out-of-doors. I was now fit to enter the woods, for I was filled with good-will and persimmons, as full as the 'possum; and putting myself under his gentle guidance, I got down upon the ground, took up his clumsy trail, and descended toward the swamp. Such an entry is one of the particular joys of the winter. To go in with a fox, a mink, or a 'possum through the door of the woods is to find yourself at home. Any one can get inside the out-of-doors, as the grocery boy or the census man gets inside our houses. You can bolt in at any time on business. A trail, however, is Nature's invitation. There may be other, better beaten paths for mere feet. But go softly with the 'possum, and at the threshold you are met by the spirit of the wood, you are made the guest of the open, silent, secret out-of-doors.

I went down with the 'possum. He had traveled home leisurely and without fear, as his tracks plainly showed. He was full of persimmons. A good happy world this, where such fare could be had for the picking! What need to hurry home, except one were in danger of falling asleep by the way? So I thought, too, as I followed his winding path; and if I was tracking him to his den, it was only to wake him for a moment with the compliments of the season. But it was not even a momentary disturbance; for when I finally found him in his hollow gum, he was sound asleep, and only half realized that some one was poking him gently in the ribs and wishing him a merry Christmas.

The 'possum had led me to the centre of the empty, hollow swamp, where the great-boled gums lifted their branches like a timbered, unshingled roof between me and the wide sky. Far away through the spaces of the rafters I saw a pair of wheeling buzzards, and under them, in lesser circles, a broad-winged hawk. Here, at the feet of the tall, clean trees, looking up through the leafless limbs, I had something of a measure for the flight of the birds. The majesty and the mystery of the distant buoyant wings were singularly impressive.

I have seen the turkey-buzzard sailing the skies on the bitterest winter days. To-day, however, could hardly be called winter. Indeed, nothing yet had felt the pinch of the cold. There was no hunger yet in the swamp, though this new snow had scared the raccoons out, and their half-human tracks along the margin of the swamp stream showed that, if not hungry, they at least feared that they might be.

For a coon hates snow. He will invariably sleep off the first light snowfalls, and even in the late winter he will not venture forth in fresh snow unless driven by hunger or some other dire need. Perhaps, like a cat or a hen, he dislikes the wetting of his feet. Or it may be that the soft snow makes bad hunting – for him. The truth is, I believe, that such a snow makes too good hunting for the dogs and the gunner. The new snow tells too clear a story. His home is no inaccessible den among the ledges; only a hollow in some ancient oak or tupelo. Once within, he is safe from the dogs, but the long fierce fight for life taught him generations ago that the nest-tree is a fatal trap when behind the dogs come the axe and the gun. So he has grown wary and enduring. He waits until the snow grows crusty, when without sign, and almost without scent, he can slip forth among the long shadows and prowl to the edge of dawn.

Skirting the stream out toward the higher back woods, I chanced to spy a bunch of snow in one of the great sour gums that I thought was an old nest. A second look showed me tiny green leaves, then white berries, then mistletoe.

It was not a surprise, for I had found it here before, – a long, long time before. It was back in my schoolboy days, back beyond those twenty years, that I first stood here under the mistletoe and had my first romance. There was no chandelier, no pretty girl, in that romance, – only a boy, the mistletoe, the giant trees, and the sombre silent swamp. Then there was his discovery, the thrill of deep delight, and the wonder of his knowledge of the strange unnatural plant! All plants had been plants to him until, one day, he read the life of the mistletoe. But that was English mistletoe; so the boy's wonder world of plant life was still as far away as Mars, when, rambling alone through the swamp along the creek, he stopped under a big curious bunch of green, high up in one of the gums, and – made his first discovery.

So the boy climbed up again this Christmas Day at the peril of his precious neck, and brought down a bit of that old romance.

I followed the stream along through the swamp to the open meadows, and then on under the steep wooded hillside that ran up to the higher land of corn and melon fields. Here at the foot of the slope the winter sun lay warm, and here in the sheltered briery border I came upon the Christmas birds.

There was a great variety of them, feeding and preening and chirping in the vines. The tangle was a-twitter with their quiet, cheery talk. Such a medley of notes you could not hear at any other season outside a city bird store. How far the different species understood one another I should like to know, and whether the hum of voices meant sociability to them, as it certainly meant to me. Doubtless the first cause of their flocking here was the sheltered warmth and the great numbers of berry-laden bushes, for there was no lack either of abundance or variety on the Christmas table.

In sight from where I stood hung bunches of withering chicken or frost grapes, plump clusters of blue-black berries of the greenbrier, and limbs of the smooth winterberry bending with their flaming fruit. There were bushes of crimson ilex, too, trees of fruiting dogwood and holly, cedars in berry, dwarf sumac and seedy sedges, while patches on the wood slopes uncovered by the sun were spread with trailing partridge berry and the coral-fruited wintergreen. I had eaten part of my dinner with the 'possum; I picked a quantity of these wintergreen berries, and continued my meal with the birds. And they also had enough and to spare.

Among the birds in the tangle was a large flock of northern fox sparrows, whose vigorous and continuous scratching in the bared spots made a most lively and cheery commotion. Many of them were splashing about in tiny pools of snow-water, melted partly by the sun and partly by the warmth of their bodies as they bathed. One would hop to a softening bit of snow at the base of a tussock, keel over and begin to flop, soon sending up a shower of sparkling drops from his rather chilly tub. A winter snow-water bath seemed a necessity, a luxury indeed, for they all indulged, splashing with the same purpose and zest that they put into their scratching among the leaves.

A much bigger splashing drew me quietly through the bushes to find a marsh hawk giving himself a Christmas souse. The scratching, washing, and talking of the birds; the masses of green in the cedars, holly, and laurels; the glowing colors of the berries against the snow; the blue of the sky, and the golden warmth of the light made Christmas in the heart of the noon that the very swamp seemed to feel.

Three months later there was to be scant picking here, for this was the beginning of the severest winter I ever knew. From this very ridge, in February, I had reports of berries gone, of birds starving, of whole coveys of quail frozen dead in the snow; but neither the birds nor I dreamed to-day of any such hunger and death. A flock of robins whirled into the cedars above me; a pair of cardinals whistled back and forth; tree sparrows, juncos, nuthatches, chickadees, and cedar-birds cheeped among the trees and bushes; and from the farm lands at the top of the slope rang the calls of meadowlarks.

Halfway up the hill I stopped under a blackjack oak, where, in the thin snow, there were signs of something like a Christmas revel. The ground was sprinkled with acorn shells and trampled over with feet of several kinds and sizes, – quail, jay, and partridge feet; rabbit, squirrel, and mice feet, all over the snow as the feast of acorns had gone on. Hundreds of the acorns were lying about, gnawed away at the cup end, where the shell was thinnest, many of them further broken and cleaned out by the birds.

As I sat studying the signs in the snow, my eye caught a tiny trail leading out from the others straight away toward a broken pile of cord-wood. The tracks were planted one after the other, so directly in line as to seem like the prints of a single foot. “That’s a weasel’s trail,” I said, “the death’s-head at this feast,” and followed it slowly to the wood. A shiver crept over me as I felt, even sooner than I saw, a pair of small sinister eyes fixed upon mine. The evil pointed head, heavy but alert, and with a suggestion of fierce strength out of all relation to the slender body, was watching me from between the sticks of cord-wood. And so he had been watching the mice and birds and rabbits feasting under the tree!

I packed a ball of snow round and hard, slipped forward upon my knees, and hurled it. “Spat!” it struck the end of a stick within an inch of the ugly head, filling the crevice with snow. Instantly the head appeared at another crack, and another ball struck viciously beside it. Now it was back where it first appeared, and did not flinch for the next, nor the next ball. The third went true, striking with a “chug” and packing the crack. But the black, hating eyes were still watching me a foot lower down.

It is not all peace and good-will in the Christmas woods. But there is more of peace and good-will than of any other spirit. The weasels are few. More friendly and timid eyes were watching me than bold and murderous. It was foolish to want to kill – even the weasel. For one’s woods are what one makes them, and so I let the man with the gun, who chanced along, think that I had turned boy again, and was snowballing the woodpile, just for the fun of trying to hit the end of the biggest stick.

I was glad he had come. As he strode off with his stained bag I felt kindlier toward the weasel. There were worse in the woods than he, – worse, because all of their killing was pastime. The weasel must kill to live, and if he gloated over the kill, why, what fault of his? But the other weasel, the one with the blood-stained bag, he killed for the love of killing. I was glad he was gone.

The crows were winging over toward their great roost in the pines when I turned toward the town. They, too, had had good picking along the creek flats and ditches of the meadows. Their powerful wing-beats and constant play told of full crops and no fear for the night, already softly gray across the white silent fields. The air was crisper; the snow began to crackle under foot; the twigs creaked and rattled as I brushed along; a brown beech leaf wavered down and skated with a thin scratch over crust; and pure as the snow-wrapped crystal world, and sweet as the soft gray twilight, came the call of a quail.

The voices, colors, odors, and forms of summer were gone. The very face of things had changed; all had been reduced, made plain, simple, single, pure! There was less for the senses, but how much keener now their joy! The wide landscape, the frosty air, the tinkle of tiny icicles, and, out of the quiet of the falling twilight, the voice of the quail!

There is no day but is beautiful in the woods; and none more beautiful than one like this Christmas Day, – warm and still and wrapped, to the round red berries of the holly, in the magic of the snow.

### III

## A Cure for Winter

For, lo, the winter is past,  
The rain is over and gone —

yet the snow lies white upon the fields, my little river huddles under the ice, and a new calendar hangs against the faded wall. But the storm is spent, the sun is out, there is a cheery *drip, drip, drip* from the eaves, eggs are sixty cents a dozen, and I am writing to the golden cackle of my hens. New Year's Day, and winter gone! No, not quite gone, with eggs at such a price; still, it must be plain to every one that I can have but little of winter left: eggs are liable to come down any day.

It would be different, of course, were I buying eggs at sixty cents, — all the difference between a winter-sick and a winter-well condition. Selling eggs for sixty cents is a cure, though not for poverty when one has only thirty hens; but it is a cure for winter. The virtue, however, is not in the sixty cents. There is no cure for winter in mere money. The virtue is in the eggs, or, perhaps, it is really found in keeping the hens.

Keeping the hens, and the two pigs, the horse, the cow, the four boys, and the farm, for the year around, is a sure cure for winter, and for a great many other ills. In addition to the farm, one must have some kind of a salary, and a real love for nature; but given the boys and the farm, the love will come, for it lies dormant in human nature, as certain seeds seem to lie dormant in the soil; and as for the salary, one must have a salary — farm or flat.

The prescription, then, should read: —

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A small farm — of an acre or more,  
A small income — of a thousand or more,  
A small family — of four boys or more,  
A real love of nature.

*Sig.* Morning and evening chores. The dose to be taken daily, as long as winter lasts.

This will cure. It is an old-fashioned household mixture that can be compounded in any country kitchen. But that is the trouble with it, — it is a *home* remedy that cannot be bought of the apothecary. There is more trouble with it, too, largely on account of the regularity with which milking time returns and the dose of chores. But it is effective. A farm and congenial chores are a sovereign cure for uncongenial time.

Here on the farm the signs of coming winter are not ominous signs. The pensive, mellowing days of early autumn have been preparing the garden and your mind for the shock of the first frost. Once past this and winter is welcome; it becomes a physical, spiritual need. The blood reddens at the promise of it; the soul turns comfortingly in and finds itself; and the digging of the potatoes commences, and the shocking of the corn, the picking of the apples, the piling up on the sunny side of the barn of the big golden squashes.

A single golden squash holds over almost enough of the summer to keep a long winter away from the farm; and the six of them in the attic, filling the rafter room with sunshine, never allow the hoary old monarch to show more than his face at the skylight. Pie is not the only thing one brings in

with his winter squashes. He stores the ripe September in their wrinkled rinds, rinds that are ridged and bossy with the summer's gold.

To dig one's own potatoes! to shock one's own corn! to pick one's own apples! to pile one's own squashes at one's own barn! It is like filling one's system with an antitoxin before going into a fever-plagued country. One is immune to winter after this, provided he stays to bake his apples in his own wood fire. One works himself into a glow with all this digging, and picking, and piling that lasts until warm weather comes again; and along with this harvest glow comes stealing over him the after-harvest peace. It is the serenity of Indian summer, the mood of the after-harvest season, upon him, – upon him and his fields and woods.

The stores are all in: the acorns have ripened and lie hidden where the squirrels will forget some of them, but where none of the forgotten will forget to grow; the winged seeds of the asters have drifted down the highways, over the hillsides and meadows; the birds are gone; the muskrats' lodge is all but finished; the hickories and the leaf-hid hepaticas are budded against the coming spring. All is ready, all is safe, – the stores are all in. Quiet and a golden peace lie warm upon the fields. It is Indian summer.

Such a mood is a necessary condition for the cure. Such a mood *is* the cure, indeed, for such a mood means harmony with earth and sky, and every wind that blows. In all his physical life man is as much a part of Nature, and as subject to her inexorable laws, as the fields and the trees and the birds. I have seen a maple growing out of the pavement of a city street, but no such maple as stands yonder at the centre of my neighbor's meadow. I lived and grew on the same street with the maple; but not as I live and grow here on the farm. Only on a farm does a man live in a normal, natural environment, only here can he comply with all the demands of Nature, can he find a cure for winter.

To Nature man is just as precious as a woodchuck or a sparrow, but not more. She cares for the woodchuck as long as he behaves like a woodchuck; so she cares for the sparrow, the oyster, the orchid, and for man. But he must behave like a natural man, must live where she intended him to live, and at the approach of winter he must neither hibernate nor migrate, for he is what the naturalists call a "winter resident." It is not in his nature to fly away nor to go to sleep, but, like the red squirrel and the muskrat, to prepare to live up all the winter. So his original, unperverted animal instinct leads him to store.

Long ago he buried his provisions in pits and hung them up on poles. Even his vocabulary he gathered together as his word-hoard. He is still possessed of the remnant of the instinct; he will still store. Cage him in a city, give him more than he needs for winter, relieve him of all possibility of want, and yet he will store. You cannot cage an instinct nor eradicate it. It will be obeyed, if all that can be found in the way of pit and pole be a grated vault in the deep recesses of some city bank.

Cage a red squirrel and he will store in the cage; so will the white-footed mouse. Give the mouse more than he can use, put him in a cellar, where there is enough already stored for a city of mice, and he will take from your piles and make piles of his own. He must store or be unhappy and undone.

A white-footed mouse got into my cellar last winter and found it, like the cellar of the country mouse in the fable, —

Full benely stuffit, baith but and ben,  
Of beirris and nuttis, peis, ry and quheit —

all of it, ready stored, so that,

Quhen ever scho list scho had aneuch to eit.

Enough to eat? Certainly; but is enough to eat all that a mouse wants? So far from being satisfied with mere meat was this particular mouse, that finding herself in the cellar in the midst of plenty,



she at once began to carry my winter stores from where I had put them, and to make little heaps for herself in every dark cranny and corner of the cellar. A pint, or less, of “nuttis” – shagbarks – she tucked away in the toe of my hunting boot. The nuts had been left in a basket in the vegetable cellar; the boots stood out by the chimney in the furnace room, and there were double doors and a brick partition wall between. No matter. Here were the nuts she had not yet stored, and out yonder was the hole, smooth and deep and dark, to store them in. She found a way past the partition wall.

Every morning I shook those nuts out of my boot and sent them rattling over the cellar floor. Every night the mouse gathered them up and put them snugly back into the toe of the boot. She could not have carried more than one nut at a time, – up the tall boot-leg and down the oily, slippery inside. I should have liked to see her scurrying about the cellar, looking after her curiously difficult harvest. Apparently, they were new nuts to her every evening. Once or twice I came down to find them lying untouched. The mouse, perhaps, was away over night on other business. But the following night they were all gathered and nicely packed in the boot as before. And as before I sent them sixty ways among the barrels and boxes of the furnace room. But I did it once too often, for it dawned upon the mouse one night that these were the same old nuts that she had gathered now a dozen times; and that night they disappeared. Where? I wondered. Weeks passed, and I had entirely forgotten about the nuts, when I came upon them, the identical nuts of my boot, tiered carefully up in a corner of the deep, empty water-tank away off in the attic.

Store? The mouse had to store. She had to, not to feed her body, – there was plenty in the cellar for that, – but to satisfy her soul. A mouse’s soul, that something within a mouse which makes for more than meat, may not be a soul at all, but only a bundle of blind instincts. The human soul, that thing whose satisfaction is so often a box of chocolates and a silk petticoat, may be better and higher than the soul of a mouse, may be a different thing indeed; but originally it, too, had simple, healthful instincts; and among them, atrophied now, but not wholly gone, may still be found the desire for a life that is more than something to eat and something to put on.

To be sure, here on the farm, one may eat all of his potatoes, his corn, his beans and squashes before the long, lean winter comes to an end. But if squashes *to eat* were all, then he could buy squashes, bigger, fairer, fatter ones, and at less cost, no doubt, at the grocery store. He may need to eat the squash, but what he needs more, and cannot buy, is the raising of it, the harvesting of it, the fathering of it. He needs to watch it grow, to pick it, to heft it, and have his neighbor heft it; to go up occasionally to the attic and look at it. He almost hates to *eat* it.

A man may live in the city and buy a squash and eat it. That is all he can do with a boughten squash; for a squash that he cannot raise, he cannot store, nor take delight in outside of pie. And can a man live where his garden is a grocery? his storehouse a grocery? his bins, cribs, mows, and attics so many pasteboard boxes, bottles, and tin cans? Tinned squash in pie may taste like any squash pie; but it is no longer squash; and is a squash nothing if not pie? Oh, but he gets a lithograph squash upon the can to show him how the pulp looked as God made it. This is a sop to his higher sensibilities; it is a commercial reminder, too, that life even in the city should be more than pie, – it is also the commercial way of preserving the flavor of the canned squash, else he would not know whether he were eating squash or pumpkin or sweet potato. But then it makes little difference, all things taste the same in the city, – all taste of tin.

There is a need in the nature of man for many things, – for a wife, a home, children, friends, and a need for winter. The wild goose feels it, too, and no length of domesticating can tame the wild desire to fly when the frosts begin to fall; the woodchuck feels it; carry him to the tropics and still he will sleep as though the snows of New England lay deep in the mouth of his burrow. The partridge’s foot broadens at the approach of winter into a snowshoe; the ermine’s fur turns snow-white. Winter is in their bones; it is good for them; it is health, not disease – with snowshoes provided and snow-colored fur.

Nature supplies her own remedies. Winter brings its own cure, – snowshoes and snowy coats, short days and long nights, the narrowed round, the widened view, the open fire, leisure, quiet, and the companionship of your books, your children, your wife, your own strange soul – here on the farm.

Where else does it come, bringing all of this? Where else are conditions such that all weather is good weather? The weather a man needs? Here he is planted like his trees; his roots are in the soil; the changing seasons are his life. He feeds upon them; works with them; rests in them; yields to them, and finds in their cycle more than the sum of his physical needs.

A man lives quite without roots in a city, like some of the orchids, hung up in the air; or oftener, like the mistletoe, rooted, but drawing his life parasitically from some simpler, stronger, fresher life planted far below him in the soil. There he cannot touch the earth and feed upon life's first sources. He knows little of any kind but bad weather. Summer is hot, winter is nasty, spring and autumn scarcely are at all, for they do not make him uncomfortable. The round year is four changes of clothes – and a tank-sprinkled, snow-choked, smoke-clouded, cobble-paved, wheel-wracked, street-scented, wire-lighted half-day, half-night something, that is neither spring, summer, autumn, nor winter.

A city is a sore on the face of Nature; not a dangerous, ugly sore, necessarily, if one can get out of it often enough and far enough, but a sore, nevertheless, that Nature will have nothing kindly to do with. The snows that roof my sheds with Carrara, that robe my trees with ermine, that spread close and warm over my mowing, that call out the sleds and the sleigh-bells, fall into the city streets as mud, as danger on the city roofs, – as a nuisance over the city's length and breadth, a nuisance to be hauled off and dumped into the harbor as fast as shovels and carts can move it.

But you cannot dump your winter and send it off to sea. There is no cure for winter in a tip-cart; no cure in the city. There is consolation in the city, for there is plenty of company in the misery. But company really means more of the misery. If life is to be endured, if all that one can do with winter is to shovel it and suffer it, then to the city for the winter, for there one's share of the shoveling is small, and the suffering there seems very evenly distributed.

Here on the farm is neither shoveling nor suffering, no quarrel whatever with the season. Here you have nothing to do with its coming or going further than making preparation to welcome it and to bid it farewell. You slide, instead, with your boys; you do up the chores early in the short twilight, pile the logs high by the blazing chimney and – you remember that there is to be a lecture to-night by the man who has said it all in his book; there is to be a concert, a reception, a club dinner, in the city, sixteen blissful miles away, – and it is snowing! You can go if you have to. But the soft tapping on the window-panes grows faster, the voices at the corners of the house rise higher, shriller. You look down at your slippers, poke up the fire, settle a little deeper into the big chair, and beg Eve to go on with the reading.

And she reads on —

Shut in from all the world without,  
We sat the clean-winged hearth about,  
Content to let the north wind roar  
In baffled rage at pane and door,  
While the red logs before us beat  
The frost-line back with tropic heat;  
And ever, when a louder blast  
Shook beam and rafter as it passed,  
The merrier up its roaring draught  
The great throat of the chimney laughed.

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Between the andirons' straddling feet,  
The mug of cider simmered slow,  
The apples sputtered in a row,  
And, close at hand, the basket stood  
With nuts from brown October's wood.

But you will be snow-bound in the morning and cannot get to town? Perhaps; but it happened so only twice to me in the long snowy winter of 1904. So twice we read the poem, and twice we lived the poem, and twice? yes, a thousand times, we were glad for a day at home that wasn't Sunday, for a whole long day to pop corn with the boys.

A farm, of all human habitations, is most of a home, and never so much of a home as in the winter when the stock and the crops are housed, when furrow and boundary fence are covered, when earth and sky conspire to drive a man indoors and to keep him in, – where he needs to stay for a while and be quiet.

No problem of city life is more serious than the problem of making in the city a home. A habitation where you can have no garden, no barn, no attic, no cellar, no chickens, no bees, no boys (we were allowed *one* boy by the janitor of our city flat), no fields, no sunset skies, no snow-bound days, can hardly be a home. To live in the fifth flat, at No. 6 West Seventh Street, is not to have a home. Pictures on the walls, a fire in the grate, and a prayer in blending zephyrs over the door for God to bless the place can scarcely make of No. 6 more than a sum in arithmetic. There is no home environment about this fifth flat at No. 6, just as there is none about cell No. 6, in the fifth tier of the west corridor of the Tombs.

The idea, the concept, home, is a house set back from the road behind a hedge of trees, a house with a yard, with flowers, chickens, and a garden, – a country home. The songs of home are all of country homes: —

How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood  
When fond recollection presents them to view:

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The gutter, the lamp-post, the curb that ran by it,  
And e'en the brass spigot that did for a well. —

Impossible! You cannot sing of No. 6, West Seventh, fifth flight up. And what of a home that cannot be remembered as a song! It is not a home, but only a floor over your head, a floor under your feet, a hole in the wall of the street, a burrow into which you are dumped by a hoisting machine. It is warm inside; Eve is with you, and the baby, and your books. But you do not hear the patter of the rain upon the roof, nor the murmur of the wind in the trees; you do not see the sun go down beyond the wooded hills, nor ever feel the quiet of the stars. You have no largeness round about you; you are the centre of nothing; you have no garden, no harvest, no chores, – no home! There is not room enough about a city flat for a home, nor chores enough in city life for a living.

For a man's life consisteth not in an abundance of things, but in the particular kind and number of his chores. A chore is a fragment of real life that is lived with the doing. All real living must be lived; it cannot be bought or hired. And herein is another serious problem in city life, – it is the tragedy of city life that it is so nearly all lived for us. We hire Tom, Dick, and Harry to live it; we buy it of the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker. It is not so here on the farm; for here one has the full round of life's chores, and here, on a professor's salary, one may do all the chores himself.

We may hire our praying and our thinking done for us and still live; but not our chores. They are to the life of the spirit what breathing and eating and sleeping are to the life of the body. Not to feed your own horse is to miss the finest joy of having a horse, – the friendship of the noble creature; not to “pick up” the eggs yourself, nor hoe your own garden, nor play with your own boys! Why, what is the use of having boys if you are never going to be “it” again, if you are not to be a boy once more along with them!

There are some things, the making of our clothes, perhaps, that we must hire done for us. But clothes are not primitive and essential; they are accidental, an adjunct, a necessary adjunct, it may be, but belonging to a different category from children, gardens, domestic animals, and a domestic home. And yet, how much less cloth we should need, and what a saving, too, of life's selvage, could we return to the spinning-wheel and loom as we go back to the farm and the daily chores!

She, harvest done, to char work did aspire,  
Meat, drink, and twopence were her daily hire.

And who has not known the same aspiration? has not had a longing for mere chores, and their ample compensation? It is such a reasonable, restful, satisfying aspiration! Harvest done! Done the work and worry of the day! Then the twilight, and the evening chores, and the soft closing of the door! At dawn we shall go forth again until the evening; but with a better spirit for our labor after the fine discipline of the morning chores. The day should start and stop in our own selves; labor should begin and come to an end in the responsibility of the wholesome, homely round of our own chores.

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