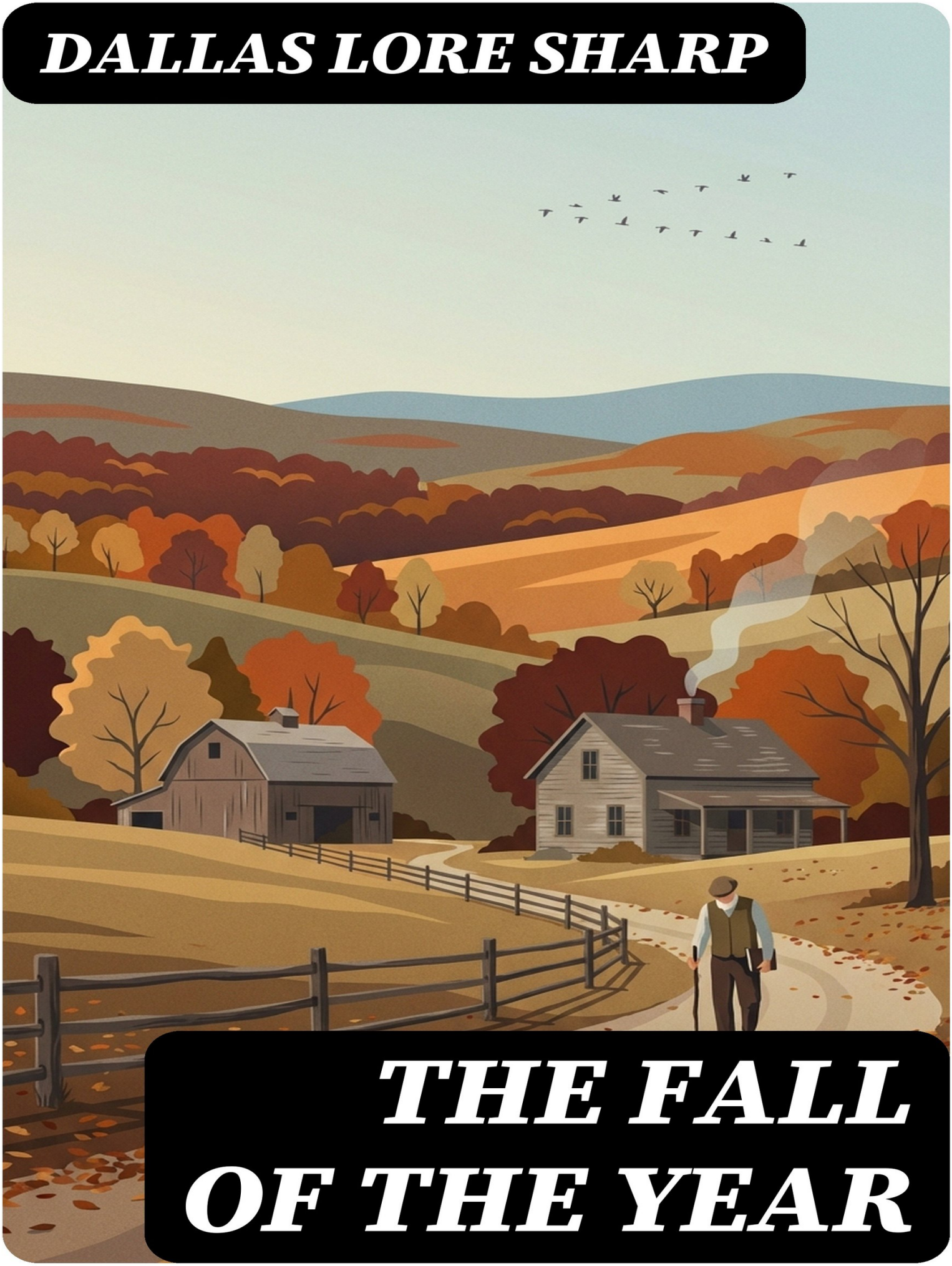
DALLAS LORE SHARP



# THE FALL OF THE YEAR

**Dallas Lore Sharp**

# The Fall of the Year

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jackson Price*

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# The Fall of the Year

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# INTRODUCTION

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There are three serious charges brought against nature books of the present time, namely, that they are either so dull as to be unreadable, or so fanciful as to be misleading, or so insincere as to be positively harmful. There is a real bottom to each of these charges.

Dull nature-writing is the circumstantial, the detailed, the cataloguing, the semi-scientific sort, dried up like old Rameses**[1]** and cured for all time with the fine-ground spice of measurements, dates, conditions—observations, so called. For literary purposes, one observation of this kind is better than two. Rarely does the watcher in the woods see anything so new that for itself it is worth recording. It is not what one sees, so much as the manner of the seeing, not the observation but its suggestions that count for interest to the reader. Science wants the exact observation; nature-writing wants the observation exact and the heart of the observer along with it. We want plenty of facts in our nature books, but they have all been set down in order before; what has not been set down before are the author's thoughts and emotions. These should be new, personal, and are pretty sure therefore to be interesting.

More serious than dullness (and that is serious enough) is the charge that nature books are untrustworthy, that they falsify the facts, and give a wrong impression of nature. Some nature books do, as some novels do with the facts of human life. A nature book all full of extraordinary, better-class animals who do extraordinary stunts because of their

superior powers has little of real nature in it. There are no such extraordinary animals, they do no such extraordinary things. Nature is full of marvels—Niagara Falls, a flying swallow, a star, a ragweed, a pebble; but nature is not full of dragons and centaurs and foxes that reason like men and take their tea with lemon, if you please.

I have never seen one of these extraordinary animals, never saw anything extraordinary out of doors, because the ordinary is so surprisingly marvelous. And I have lived in the woods practically all of my life. And you will never see one of them—a very good argument against anybody's having seen them.

The world out of doors is not a circus of performing prodigies, nor are nature-writers strange half-human creatures who know wood-magic, who talk with trees, and call the birds and beasts about them as did one of the saints of old. No, they are plain people, who have seen nothing more wonderful in the woods than you have, if they would tell the truth.

When I protested with a popular nature-writer some time ago at one of his exciting but utterly impossible fox stories, he wrote back,—

"The publishers demanded that chapter to make the book sell."

Now the publishers of this book make no such demands. Indeed they have had an expert naturalist and woodsman hunting up and down every line of this book for errors of fact, false suggestions, wrong sentiments, and extraordinaries of every sort. If this book is not exciting it is the publishers' fault. It may not be exciting, but I believe,

and hope, that it is *true* to all of my out of doors, and not untrue to any of yours.

The charge of insincerity, the last in the list, concerns the author's style and sentiments. It does not belong in the same category with the other two, for it really includes them. Insincerity is the mother of all the literary sins. If the writer cannot be true to himself, he cannot be true to anything. Children are the particular victims of the evil. How often are children spoken to in baby-talk, gush, hollow questions, and a condescension as irritating as coming teeth! They are written to, also, in the same spirit.

The temptation to sentimentalize in writing of the "beauties of nature" is very strong. Raptures run through nature books as regularly as barbs the length of wire fences. The world according to such books is like the Garden of Eden according to Ridinger, all peace, in spite of the monstrous open-jawed alligator in the foreground of the picture, who must be smiling, I take it, in an alligatorish way at a fat swan near by.

Just as strong to the story-writer is the temptation to blacken the shadows of the picture—to make all life a tragedy. Here on my table lies a child's nature-book every chapter of which ends in death—nothing but struggle to escape for a brief time the bloody jaws of the bigger beast—or of the superior beast, man.

Neither extreme is true of nature. Struggle and death go on, but, except where man interferes, a very even balance is maintained, peace prevails over fear, joy lasts longer than pain, and life continues to multiply and replenish the earth. "The level of wild life," to quote my words from "The Face of

the Fields,” “of the soul of all nature is a great serenity. It is seldom lowered, but often raised to a higher level, intenser, faster, more exultant.”

This is a divinely beautiful world, a marvelously interesting world, the best conceivable sort of a world to live in, notwithstanding its gypsy moths, tornadoes, and germs, its laws of gravity, and of cause and effect; and my purpose in this series of nature books is to help my readers to come by this belief. A clear understanding of the laws of the Universe will be necessary for such a belief in the end, and with the understanding a profound faith in their perfect working together. But for the present, in these books of the Seasons, if I can describe the out of doors, its living creatures and their doings, its winds and skies with their suggestions—all of the out of doors, as it surrounds and supports me here in my home on Mullein Hill**[2]**, Hingham, so that you can see how your out of doors surrounds and supports you, with all its manifold life and beauty, then I have done enough. If only I can accomplish a fraction of this I have done enough.

Dallas Lore Sharp.

Mullein Hill, September, 1911.

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THE FALL OF THE YEAR

# CHAPTER I
## THE CLOCK STRIKES ONE

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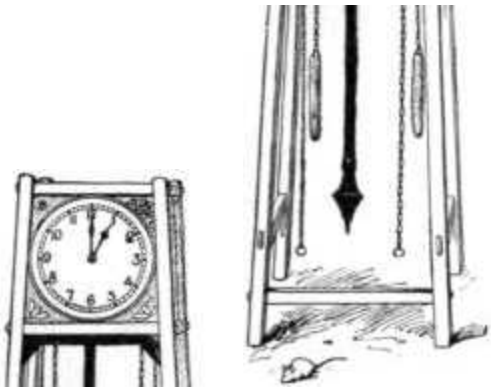
“The clock strikes one,
And all is still around the house!
But in the gloom
A little mouse
Goes creepy-creep from room to room.”



**THE** clock of the year strikes one**[1q]**!—not in the dark silent night of winter, but in the hot light of midsummer.

It is a burning July day,—one o’clock in the afternoon of the year,—and all is still around the fields and woods. All is still. All is hushed. But yet, as I listen, I hear things in the dried grass, and in the leaves overhead, going “creepy-creep,” as you have heard the little mouse in the silent night.

I am lying on a bed of grass in the shade of a great oak tree, as the clock of the year strikes one. I am all alone in the quiet of the hot, hushed day. Alone? Are you alone in the big upstairs at midnight, when you hear the little mouse

going “creepy-creep” from room to room? No; and I am not alone.

High overhead the clouds are drifting past; and between them, far away, is the blue of the sky—and how blue, how cool, how far, far away! But how near and warm seems the earth!

I lie outstretched upon it, feeling the burnt crisp grass beneath me, a beetle creeping under my shoulder, the heat of a big stone against my side. I throw out my hands, push my fingers into the hot soil, and try to take hold of the big earth as if I were a child clinging to my mother.

And so I am. But I am not frightened, as I used to be, when the little mouse went “creepy-creep,” and my real mother brought a candle to scare the mouse away. It is because I am growing old? But I cannot grow old to my mother. And the earth is my mother, my second mother**[2q]**. The beetle moving under my shoulder is one of my brothers; the hot stone by my side is another of my brothers; the big oak tree over me is another of my brothers; and so are the clouds, the white clouds drifting, drifting, drifting, so far away yonder, through the blue, blue sky.

The clock of the year strikes one. The summer sun is overhead. The flood-tide of summer life has come. It is the noon hour of the year.

The drowsy silence of the full, hot noon lies deep across the field. Stream and cattle and pasture-slope are quiet in repose. The eyes of the earth are heavy. The air is asleep. Yet the round shadow of my oak begins to shift. The cattle

do not move; the pasture still sleeps under the wide, white glare.

But already the noon is passing—to-day I see the signs of coming autumn everywhere.

Of the four seasons of the year summer is the shortest, and the one we are least acquainted with. Summer is hardly a pause between spring and autumn, simply the hour of the year's noon.

We can be glad with the spring, sad with the autumn, eager with the winter; but it is hard for us to go softly, to pause and to be still with the summer; to rest on our wings a little like the broad-winged hawk yonder, far up in the wide sky.

But now the hawk is not still. The shadow of my oak begins to lengthen. The hour is gone; and, wavering softly down the languid air, falls a yellow leaf from a slender birch near by. I remember, too, that on my way through the woodlot I frightened a small flock of robins from a pine; and more than a week ago the swallows were gathering upon the telegraph wires. So quickly summer passes. It was springtime but yesterday, it seems; to-day the autumn is here.

It is a July day. At dawn the birds were singing, fresh and full-throated almost as in spring. Then the sun burned through the mist, and the chorus ceased. Now I do not hear even the chewink**[3]** and the talkative vireo. Only the fiery notes of the scarlet tanager come to me through the dry white heat of the noon, and the resonant song of the indigo bunting—a hot, metallic, quivering song, as out of a "hot and copper sky."

There are nestlings still in the woods. This indigo bunting has eggs or young in the bushes of the hillside; the scarlet tanager by some accident has but lately finished his nest in the tall oaks. I looked in upon some half-fledged cuckoos along the fence. But all of these are late. Most of the year's young are upon the wing.

A few of the spring's flowers are still opening. I noticed the bees upon some tardy raspberry blossoms; here and there is a stray dandelion. But these are late. The season's fruit has already set, is already ripening. Spring is gone; the sun is overhead; the red wood-lily is open. To-day is the noon of the year.

High noon! and the red wood-lily is aflame in the old fields, and in the low tangles of sweet-fern and blackberry that border the upland woods.

The wood-lily is the flower of fire. How impossible it would be to kindle a wood-lily on the cold, damp soil of April! It can be lighted only on this kiln-dried soil of July. This old hilly pasture is baking in the sun; the low mouldy moss that creeps over its thin breast crackles and crumbles under my feet; the patches of sweet-fern that blotch it here and there crisp in the heat and fill the smothered air with their spicy breath; while the wood-lily opens wide and full, lifting its spotted lips to the sun for his scorching kiss. See it glow! Should the withered thicket burst suddenly into a blaze, it would be no wonder, so hot and fiery seem the petals of this flower of the sun.

How unlike the tender, delicate fragrant flowers of spring are these strong flowers of the coming fall! They make a high bank along the stream—milkweed, boneset,