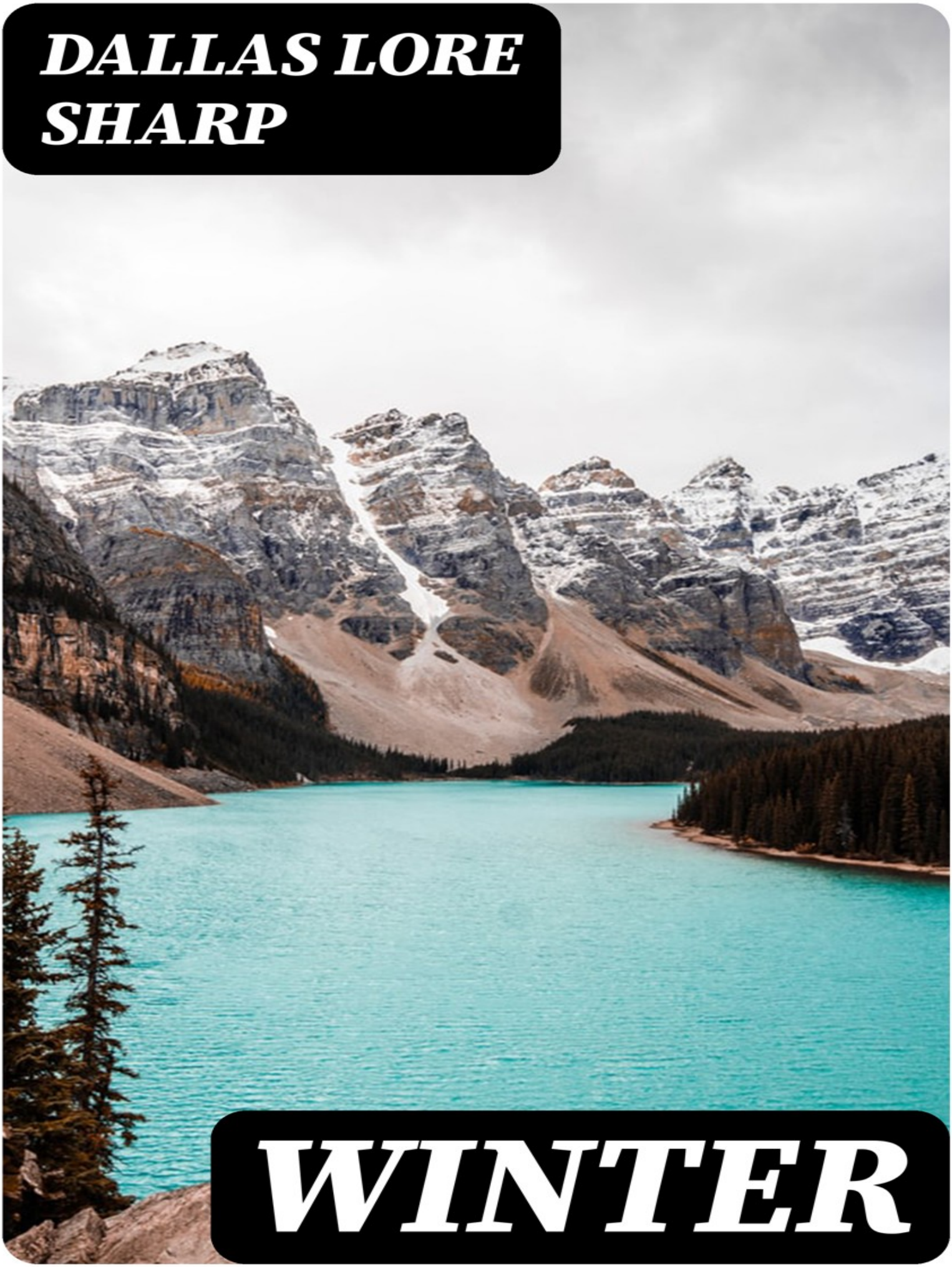
DALLAS LORE SHARP
WINTER

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EAN 8596547234388

DigiCat, 2022
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INTRODUCTION

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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.

WINTER

CHAPTER I
HUNTING THE SNOW

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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.