



Poachers and Poaching

John Watson

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The poacher is a product of sleepy village life, and usually "mouches" on the outskirts of country towns. His cottage is roughly adorned in fur and feather, and abuts on the fields. There is a fitness in this, and an appropriateness in the two gaunt lurchers stretched before the door. These turn day into night on the sunny roadside in summer, and before the cottage fire in winter. Like the poacher, they are active and silent when the village community is asleep. Our Bohemian has poached time out of mind. His family have been poachers for generations. The county justices, the magistrates' clerk, the county constable, and the gaol books all testify to the same fact. The poacher's lads have grown up under their father's tuition, and follow in his footsteps. Even now they are inveterate poachers, and have a special instinct for capturing field-mice and squirrels. They take moles in their runs, and preserve their skins. When a number of these are collected they are sold to the labourers' wives, who make them into vests. In wheat-time the farmers employ the lads to keep down sparrows and finches. Numbers of larks are taken in nooses, and in spring lapwings' eggs yield quite a rich harvest from the uplands and ploughed fields. A shilling so earned is to the young poacher riches indeed; money so acquired is looked upon differently from that earned by steady-going labour on the field or farm. In their season he gathers cresses and blackberries, the embrowned nuts constituting an autumn in themselves. Snipe and woodcock, which come to the marshy meadows in severe weather, are taken in "gins" and "springes." Traps are laid for wild ducks in the runners when the still mountain tarns are frozen over. When our poacher's lads attain to sixteen they become in turn the owner of an old flintlock, an heirloom, which has been in the family for generations. Then larger game can be got at. Wood-pigeons are waited for in the larches, and shot as they come to roost. Large numbers of plover are bagged from time to time, both green and grey. These feed in the water meadows through autumn and winter, and are always plentiful. In spring the rare dotterels were sometimes shot as they stayed on their way to the hills; or a gaunt heron was brought down as it flew heavily from a ditch. To the now disused mill-dam ducks came on wintry evening—teal, mallard, and pochards. The lad lay coiled up behind a willow root, and waited during the night. Soon the whistling of wings was heard, and dark forms appeared against the skyline. The old duck-gun was out, a sharp report tore the darkness, and a brace of teal floated down stream and washed on to the mill island. In this way half-a-dozen ducks would be bagged, and dead or dying were left where they fell, and retrieved next morning. Sometimes big game was obtained in the shape of a brace of wild geese, the least wary of a flock; but these only came in the severest weather.

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