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*My Poacher* by H. E. Bates

A LETTER from a friend tells me that Buck is dead and that there is something in the papers about him. But the fact that he had done time and had been a great poacher is not published. He was famous, as fame went in those days, before I was born. Though I must have seen him hundreds of times, I spoke to him once only. He was a very big man, fifteen or sixteen stone. In his prime, which must have been in the 'nineties, he probably never weighed more than thirteen, perhaps even less. He could hardly have afforded to weigh more. For though he was a shoemaker by profession, and a fine shoemaker too, and a prizefighter by necessity, he was a poacher by instinct. And that meant he was also an athlete. The poacher of to-day travels by car, even by bus or lorry. Buck travelled on foot. His poaching grounds, the parks of neighbouring castles and mansions, were fifteen miles off. To-day that means nothing. To Buck it meant a night walk of over thirty miles, with the gutted and often ungutted rabbits weighing him down on the homeward journey, the furlongs changing into miles and the miles to leagues as the rabbits grew heavier and heavier. And that on a good night, with luck. On a bad night, with the keepers out, it meant that the homeward journey became not a walk, but a run, the rabbits dumped perhaps to make the going lighter. And since keepers can also run it would very often mean a fight in the darkness. So that Buck can hardly have carried any excessive weight in his prime. Even in his later years he was very solid. There was no appearance of looseness, no belly, no seediness. The hardness of the poaching, prize-fighting days never left him. He walked very upright, rather slowly, with the typical ponderous muscular swagger of his age and his class, his hands thrust into his trouser-belt, his shoemaker's bowler tilted back, his legs apart, the smoky clay stuck close under the end of his nose. He could spit on a flea: the long swift nonchalant spit of a careless artist.

Going to school one morning, with a pair of very new brown shoes on, I met Buck. Brown shoes, not boots, were then only just coming into vogue, and there was something still a little effeminate about them. I was very proud of mine. Buck said good morning to me. He said good morning to everyone. 'Good morning', I said. He took one long sardonic look at me. And then he said, 'Brown shoes'. No more. But it was a masterly stroke of contempt which I shall never forget. Not that Buck was ever, I think, vindictive. He was famous for the richness and spontaneity of his humour. Wherever Buck appeared there was laughter. He was comic. He bawled affectionate and tenderly droll remarks to strange young women across the street. His voice was immense, truly Falstaffian, so that his private remarks were public and his public utterances universal. And it was his voice and his humour that gave him, more than all his poaching and fighting, the glory that he enjoyed. The respectable and often bloodless life of the new Midland towns threw Buck into comic and robust relief. And he accepted the new life. He was a great picture-goer, and his bawled asides, in the sudden hushes preceding the close-ups of cinema love, were famous. And finally, as is so often the case with extremely physical types, he was most tender with children. The character of his humour, often gross, only changed in order to become fantastic. And so I heard a little girl say to him, as all little girls said to him: 'What'd you have to-day for dinner, Mr. Buck?' And heard him reply, 'Plum pudden on a gold plate, my gal'.

