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POACHING DAYS.

THE SURVIVAL OF A PRIMITIVE INSTINCT : ADVENTURES BY NIGHT.

By H. E. BATES.

No sooner is corn cut and stubble bare than the young pheasants are released in tame flocks along the woodsides.

Mothered all summer long by stupid hens, they are rather like large stupid brown chickens themselves. They grow with great rapidity, chickens one week, timorous and fussy and uncertain even on the wide stubbles, strutting like young bloods the next, with the first sign of pheasant-arrogance that reaches its height at the end of September, when cocks stroll across the roads with the damnable proud indifference of peacocks, savagely scarlet and electric blue and wild-looking, and yet, ironically, almost as tame as ducks on an orchard pond.

The pheasant occupies an odd position in English bird life; it is the royal pretender, the pampered scarlet-crowned would-be king of every field and wood. Fussed and indulged and protected from all manner of evil by armed guards, he leads the sheltered life of a royal heir, and all for one purpose. By some ironical chance he bears the sign of that purpose on his head, in the fierce scarlet side-splashes that might be his inheritance of spilt blood. Though he struts like a royal pretender, he is, from egg onwards, one thing, and one thing only. He is the lamb to the slaughter.

And in September, as in spring, he makes the woods places of miserable uneasiness. You must not go near, you must not look at him. However respectable and sweet and harmless you may be, you are a potential killer. You may even be, which is worse, a potential poacher.

Hunter and hunted.

Because, by the unalterable law of have and have not, the poacher comes into his heyday when the pheasant comes into his. The one, in a sense, has produced the other. I will not say that by abolishing the pheasant you would also abolish the poacher. The poacher is something more than this; he is a survival, bang in the middle of civilization, of primitive man, of the hunter in the wild. With the fisherman, he is the last of a race hunting by its own skill and for its own joy and profit the wild creatures of earth. He is even one above the fisherman—that is, the fresh-water fisherman—who now, generally, puts the fish into the water before he can hope to pull any out again. The poacher has one other distinction: he is the only survivor, now that the smuggler has gone, of the romantic thief, of the hunter who is himself hunted.

It is, altogether, an exciting craft. What could be more exciting, at any rate in this now placid, smooth-shaven, no longer wild countryside of ours? The poacher works by night, in the difficulty of darkness, by primitive methods, on other people's land. He runs considerable risk, even the supreme risk. He needs great courage, great and specialized skill, and some kind of inborn love and understanding and appetite, some kind of shifty hunger for wild life and air. His craft is only thieving by chance. He is driven primarily by some irrepressible instinct for excitement and danger, by some love of wild pursuit for which he is not consciously responsible.

What is the urge?

I have never believed that sheer want or an instinct of rebellion against society ever drove a man to poaching. I was brought up in a town notorious for its poachers: an industrial town of nearly fifteen thousand people, with all the respectable paraphernalia of churches and societies and brass bands and bands of brothers. Also, a prosperous town, a town in which the

girls are as smart as models and in which the streets of anything like real squalor at all can be counted on the fingers of one hand. A town also with an extreme civic consciousness and respectability.

And also, twenty-five or thirty or forty years ago, swarming with poachers, master-craftsman shoemakers, most of them, who could earn, because they were master craftsmen working in their own time and at their own leisure, what money they pleased within the limits of their trade. All shoemakers by day and poachers by night. What drove them? Clearly not money. It came into it, but it was not paramount. Also, not hatred of the squire, since personal contact between squire and poacher was almost non-existent. The two, often, never saw each other. They lived at a distance, in different worlds. If there was any hatred at all it was between poacher and keeper, which was the result of and not the cause of poaching.

The thrill of the chase.

Nor was the pheasant itself the cause. Rabbits did just as well; anything did just as well—hares, partridges, pigeons, even fox cubs, even young badgers to bring home and keep for a day or two in the old back-yard hen-roost. Anything did; anything to hunt or capture or kill with a reasonable chance of excitement. It was the expression of a primitive instinct, so strong that it took men beyond the confines of their legitimate occupation into a chancy occupation that could and did entail prison and wounding and even, remotely, death.

Have you ever eaten a poached pheasant? It tastes very good. It seems in some way more piquant than the plucked and skewered bird delivered by the poulterer. This is pure fancy, of course, but there is some sweet relish in eating a poached bird, just as there is in eating a scrumptious apple. My aunt, who keeps a small white pub in the Midland village, often exchanged an honest quart for a dishonest bird and pursed her severe lips and looked at the sky and said nothing. Hares, too, and rabbits, still blood-warm as they slid over the bar. And all the time looking as though she never put a toenail over the chalk-line of right and respectability.

Under cover of darkness.

And, in September, the poacher starts. Darkness begins to come down earlier, and it is the protection of darkness above all that he wants, and in fact the only protection he can hope to get. The woods also are regaining their life. The summer vacuum of bird silence and shadowiness have been broken. The life is flowing again—back now, really ebbing, like the sap itself. In the woods, especially, life and sap are synonymous. It is that uprising of sap in April and May and even March that gives woods their beautiful and stimulating sense of life. It is the flowing back, the slow return to death and the bottom of the pit, that gives them in autumn that peculiar air of soft melancholy, the infusion of sad odours and the sweet death of uncountable leaves.

In late September the full fruition of things has come: wood-nuts hanging pale green among the already formed and even paler green next-year's catkins, black ripening of elderberries and blackberries, the first bloodiness of honeysuckle-berry and bryony and even hip and haw, the greening of sweet-chestnuts, the cupping of acorns. The trees are thinning, not much, imperceptibly, and the light is coming in. The stitches in the leaf canopy are breaking and rotting. There is a casual soundless spinning down of first leaves.