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THE POACHER'S HANDBOOK

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A MAN named Jeck was my first teacher. If he is still alive I imagine he is less nimble and even more astute than when I was his pupil at five years of age. Jeck worked for us to the annoyance of neighbours who had game on their land. He was unreliable as a worker. One day he would be at the plough, plodding the hill with the gulls flying behind him and the next day he would be missing. From our biggest hill, a hog's back topped by a fir planting, most of the countryside could be seen. Jeck could see the river; the little woods, that clogged the hollows, ran along lesser hills and stretched back into the moss. Sometimes I stumbled and staggered up to the plough with his tea-can and buttered scones and he would crouch on his heels, take a mouthful of tea, and look dreamily at the landscape to the west.

"Johnnie boy," he would say, "see yonder? It's the greatest place for an old cock pheasant. I seen the day when I could walk quiet along yon hedgeside, slip through the fence an' let fly."

And the next day Jeck would be missing. Perhaps I would hear that he had seen such a day again, but I was a very small boy, and small boys are rarely the recipients of confidences that might put a man in prison.

Before the schoolmaster, who needed a strap to inculcate knowledge, had conveyed the sequence of the alphabet to my brain, Jeck had given me the way of straightening snare wire, forming the pear-shaped noose, yes, and the vital intelligence of the setting height and the place in which to set. I put down my first snare under Jeck's supervision. It was on a stubble slope where a hare was running at night. When the alarm awoke the household for the five o'clock milking, long before the grey streak of early winter dawn and the first cock-crow from the locked henhouse, I was out of bed. The frost bit my toes. I could not wait to put on stockings and lace my little boots. I had to go barefoot and half-dressed, as I often did in summer. I crossed the field, skirted the gloomy clumps of gorse and ducked under the squealing fence to come to the hillside. Before I saw my catch I could hear the thump of his powerful back legs as he bounded in the noose. I ran to him, clasped him in my arms, drew the pin and carried him homeward, while every wild kick lacerated my bare knees.

Many years later, returning from school in the south, I had the opportunity of fishing a stretch of

salmon water owned by a neighbour, a privilege obtained for me by my aunts, who wanted to keep me out of disreputable company for as long as I could be diverted. I went with borrowed net and gaff, borrowed flies and a rod like a binder whip. A whole afternoon I cast and re-cast my flies, and when the village school spilled its children on the road I was joined by a torn-trousered urchin. He unwound a length of twine to which he attached a clumsy hook. On the hook he fastened a piece of red flannel, snipped, perhaps, from his grandmother's petticoat, and cast hook and red bait into the water. In five minutes he had a pike on his line. It careered this way and that. The water swirled and gave up bubbles and the boy hastened to a stump, round which he looped his line. I watched, fascinated, while he brought the long-snouted, fierce-looking gad-fish to the bank, and then I wound up my reel, put the delicate cast back in the pouch and went home. Someone had told me when I was quite small that the way to catch a salmon was to put a prawn on a hook, use salmon roe, draw a net, or hook him out of the water at the salmon-leap, and the way to catch a pike was to use red flannel; bait a hook with a live frog, or even a mouse.

Put the conventional behind you. Put your hand in the horny palm of Francie McGinn and come to the stable to learn the knots for net-making. Look now and then at the silvery light of the moon on the cobwebbed skylight and know that this is a night for staying at home, for the moon is too full and the ground too hard and the night too still. Talk small and listen to a thing as old as the hills, as natural as

the gentle swish of the fir branches, the raindrops spearing across a deep pool.

The ways of coming by a rabbit, a pheasant, partridge or trout are as numerous as the hairs on your

mongrel dog. You must learn the use of the gate net, the long net, the snare, the ferret, the purse net and many other devices from a whistle to a kite. You must learn to walk softly and to listen long, when to run and when to stand still; the thing to do in the black hat of night and the way to read the flushed magpie and the laugh of the jay. A pigeon in flight never crosses directly over a man on open ground. When a faraway pigeon deviates in the line of flight you must learn to watch for the subsequent movement of sheep from the hedge to the corner of the field and the horse's pricked ears. It is wrong to go hastily away like the startled partridge rising among your feet. Close at hand is the hawthorn hedge, the clump of hazels and the shadows that swallow you from the bright light of the day.

You will hear every way of finding game and every