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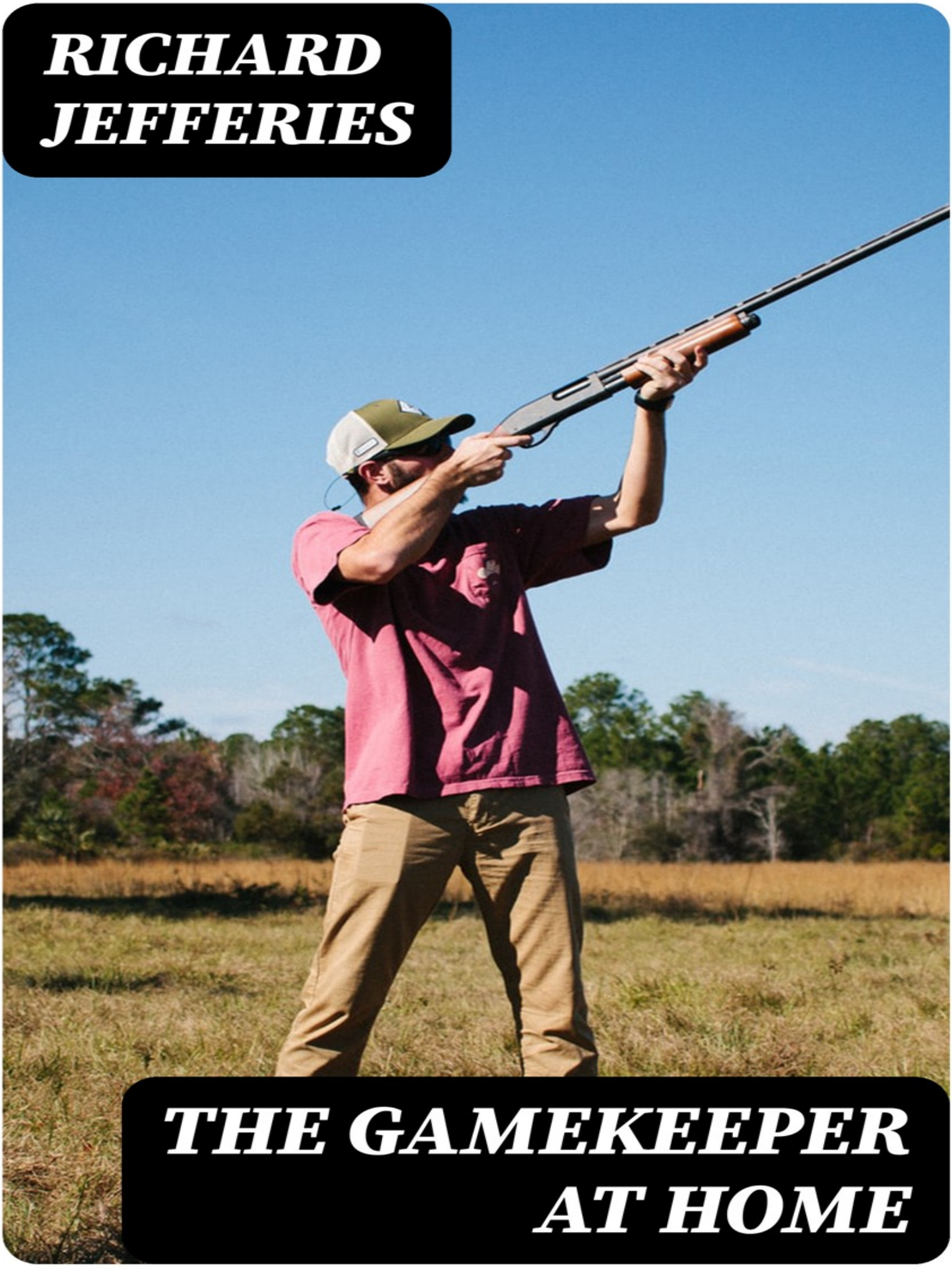

THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME

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The Gamekeeper at Home

Sketches of natural history and rural life (Illustrated)

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PREFACE.

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THOSE who delight in roaming about amongst the fields and lanes, or have spent any time in a country house, can hardly have failed to notice the custodian of the woods and covers, or to observe that he is often something of a ‘character.’ The Gamekeeper forms, indeed, so prominent a figure in rural life as almost to demand some biographical record of his work and ways. From the man to the territories over which he bears sway—the meadows, woods, and streams—and to his subjects, their furred and feathered inhabitants, is a natural transition. The enemies against whom he wages incessant warfare—vermin, poachers, and trespassers—must, of course, be included in such a survey.

Although, for ease and convenience of illustration, the character of a particular Keeper has been used as a nucleus about which to arrange materials that would otherwise have lacked a connecting link, the facts here collected are really entirely derived from original observation.

R.J.

CHAPTER I.

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The Man himself—his house, and Tools.

THE keeper's cottage stands in a sheltered 'coombe,' or narrow hollow of the woodlands, overshadowed by a mighty Spanish chestnut, bare now of leaves, but in summer a noble tree. The ash wood covers the slope at the rear; on one side is a garden, and on the other a long strip of meadow with elms. In front, and somewhat lower, a streamlet winds, fringing the sward, and across it the fir plantations begin, their dark sombre foliage hanging over the water. A dead willow trunk thrown from bank to bank forms a rude bridge; the tree, not even squared, gives little surface for the foot, and in frosty weather a slip is easy. From this primitive contrivance a path, out of which others fork, leads into the intricacies of the covers, and from the garden a wicket-gate opens on the ash wood. The elms in the meadow are full of rooks' nests, and in the spring the coombe will resound with their cawing; these black bandits, who do not touch it at other times, will then ravage the garden to feed their hungry young, despite ingenious scarecrows. A row of kennels, tenanted by a dozen dogs, extends behind the cottage: lean retrievers yet unbroken, yelping spaniels, pointers, and perhaps a few greyhounds or fancy breeds, if 'young master' has a taste that way.

Beside the kennels is a shed ornamented with rows upon rows of dead and dried vermin, furred and feathered, impaled for their misdeeds; and over the door a couple of

horseshoes nailed for luck—a superstition yet lingering in the by-ways of the woods and hills. Within are the ferret hutches, warm and dry; for the ferret is a shivery creature, and likes nothing so well as to nozzle down in a coat-pocket with a little hay. Here are spades and bill-hooks, twine and rabbit nets, traps, and other odds and ends scattered about with the wires and poacher’s implements impounded from time to time.

In a dark corner there lies a singular-looking piece of mechanism, a relic of the olden times, which, when dragged into the light, turns out to be a man-trap. These terrible engines have long since been disused—being illegal, like spring-guns—and the rust has gathered thickly on the metal. But, old though it be, it still acts perfectly, and can be ‘set’ as well now as when in bygone days poachers and thieves used to prod the ground and the long grass, before they stepped among it, with a stick, for fear of mutilation.

THE ROW OF KENNELS.

The trap is almost precisely similar to the common rat-trap or gin still employed to destroy vermin, but greatly exaggerated in size, so that if stood on end it reaches to the

waist, or above. The jaws of this iron wolf are horrible to contemplate—rows of serrated projections, which fit into each other when closed, alternating with spikes a couple of inches long, like tusks. To set the trap you have to stand on the spring—the weight of a man is about sufficient to press it down; and, to avoid danger to the person preparing this little surprise, a band of iron can be pushed forward to hold the spring while the catch is put into position, and the machine itself is hidden among the bushes or covered with dead leaves. Now touch the pan with a stout walking-stick—the jaws cut it in two in the twinkling of an eye. They seem to snap together with a vicious energy, powerful enough to break the bone of the leg; and assuredly no man ever got free whose foot was once caught by these terrible teeth.

The keeper will tell you that it used to be set up in the corner of the gardens and orchard belonging to the great house, and which, in the pre-policemen days, were almost nightly robbed. He thinks there were quite as many such traps set in the gardens just outside the towns as ever there were in the woods and preserves of the country proper. He recollects but one old man (a mole-catcher) who actually had experienced in his youth the sensation of being caught; he went lame on one foot, the sinews having been cut or divided. The trap could be chained to its place if desired; but, as a matter of fact, a chain was unnecessary, for no man could possibly drag this torturing clog along.

Another outhouse attached to the cottage contains a copper for preparing the food for both quadrupeds and birds. Some poultry run about the mead, and perhaps with

them are feeding the fancy foreign ducks which in summer swim in the lake before the hall.

The cottage is thatched and oddly gabled—built before ‘improvements’ came into fashion—yet cosy; with walls three feet thick, which keep out the cold of winter and the heat of summer. This is not solid masonry; there are two shells, as it were, filled up between with rubble and mortar rammed down hard.

Inside the door the floor of brick is a step below the level of the ground. Sometimes a peculiar but not altogether unpleasant odour fills the low-pitched sitting-room—it is emitted by the roots burning upon the fire, hissing as the sap exudes and boils in the fierce heat. When the annual fall of timber takes place the butts of the trees are often left in the earth, to be afterwards grubbed and split for firewood, which goes to the great house or is sold. There still remain the roots, which are cut into useful lengths and divided among the upper employés. From elm and oak and ash, and the crude turpentine of the fir, this aromatic odour, the scent of the earth in which they grew, is exhaled as they burn.

THE KEEPER’S KITCHEN.

The ceiling is low and crossed by one huge square beam of oak, darkened by smoke and age. The keeper’s double-barrelled gun is suspended from this beam: there are several other guns in the house, but this, the favourite, alone hangs where it did before he had children—so strong is habit; the rest are yet more out of danger. It has been a noble weapon, though now showing signs of age—the interior of the breech worn larger than the rest of the barrel from constant use; so much so that, before it was converted to a breech-loader, the wad, when the ramrod pushed it down, would slip the last six inches, so loosely fitting as to barely answer its purpose of retaining the shot; so that when cleaned out, before the smoke fouled it again, he had to load with paper. This in a measure anticipated the ‘choke-bore,’ and his gun was always famous for its killing power. The varnish is worn from the stock by incessant friction against his coat, showing the real grain of the walnut-wood, and the trigger-guard with the polish of the sleeve shines like silver. It has been his companion for so many years that it is not strange he should feel an affection for it; no other ever fitted the shoulder so well, or came with such delicate

precision to the ‘present’ position. So accustomed is he to its balance and ‘hang’ in the hand that he never thinks of aiming; he simply looks at the object, still or moving, throws the gun up from the hollow of his arm, and instantly pulls the trigger, staying not a second to glance along the barrel. It has become almost a portion of his body, answering like a limb to the volition of will without the intervention of reflection. The hammers are chased and elegantly shaped—perfectly matching: when once the screw came loose, and the jar of a shot jerked one off among the dead leaves apparently beyond hope of recovery, he never rested night or day till by continuous search and sifting the artistic piece of metal was found. Nothing destroys the symmetry of a gun so much as hammers which are not pairs; and well he knew that he should never get a smith to replace that delicate piece of workmanship, for this gun came originally from the hands of a famous maker, who got fifty, or perhaps even seventy guineas for it years ago. It did not shoot to please the purchaser—guns of the very best character sometimes take use to get into thorough order—and was thrown aside, and so the gun became the keeper’s.

These fine old guns often have a romance clinging to them, and sometimes the history is a sad one. Upstairs he still keeps the old copper powder-flask curiously chased and engraved, yet strong enough to bear the weight of the bearer if by chance he sat down upon it while in his pocket, together with the shot-belt and punch for cutting out the wads from card-board or an old felt hat. These the modern system of loading at the breech has cast aside. Here, also, is

the apparatus for filling empty cartridge-cases—a work which in the season occupies him many hours.

Being an artist in his way, he takes a pride in the shine and polish of his master’s guns, which are not always here, but come down at intervals to be cleaned and attended to. And woe be to the first kid gloves that touch them afterwards; for a gun, like a sardine, should be kept in fine oil, not thickly encrusting it, but, as it were, rubbed into and oozing from the pores of the metal and wood. Paraffin is an abomination in his eyes (for preserving from rust), and no modern patent oil, he thinks, can compare with a drop of gin for the locks—the spirit never congeals in cold weather, and the hammer comes up with a clear, sharp snick. He has two or three small screwdrivers and gunsmith’s implements to take the locks to pieces; for gentlemen are sometimes careless and throw their guns down on the wet grass, and if a single drop of water should by chance penetrate under the plate it will play mischief with the works if the first speck of rust be not forthwith removed.

His dog-whistle hangs at his buttonhole. His pocket-knife is a basket of tools in itself, most probably a present from some youthful sportsman who was placed under his care to learn how to handle a gun. The corkscrew it contains has seen much service at luncheon-time, when under a sturdy oak, or in a sheltered nook of the lane, where the hawthorn hedge and the fern broke the force of the wind, a merry shooting-party sat down to a well-packed hamper and wanted some one to draw the corks. Not but what the back of the larger blade has not artistically tapped off the neck of many a bottle, hitting it gently upwards against the rim. Nor

must his keys be forgotten. The paths through the preserves, where they debouch on a public lane or road, are closed with high-sparred wicket gates, well pitched to stand the weather, and carefully locked, and of course he has a key. His watch, made on purpose for those who walk by night, tells him the time in the densest darkness of the woods. On pressing a spring and holding it near the ear, it strikes the hour last passed, then the quarters which have since elapsed; so that even when he cannot see an inch before his face he knows the time within fifteen minutes at the outside, which is near enough for practical purposes.

In personal appearance he would be a tall man were it not that he has contracted a slight stoop in the passage of the years, not from weakness or decay of nature, but because men who walk much lean forward somewhat, which has a tendency to round the shoulders. The weight of the gun, and often of a heavy game-bag dragging downwards, has increased this defect of his figure, and, as is usual after a certain age, even with those who lead a temperate life, he begins to show signs of corpulency. But these shortcomings only slightly detract from the manliness of his appearance, and in youth it is easy to see that he must have been an athlete. There is still plenty of power in the long sinewy arms, brown hands, and bull-neck, and intense vital energy in the bright blue eye. He is an ash-tree man, as a certain famous writer would say; hard, tough, unconquerable by wind or weather, fearless of his fellows, yielding but by slow and imperceptible degrees to the work of time. His neck has become the colour of mahogany; sun and tempest have left their indelible marks upon his face; and he speaks from the

depths of his broad chest, as men do who talk much in the open air, shouting across the fields

THE KEEPER.

and through the copses. There is a solidity in his very footstep, and he stands like an oak. He meets your eye full and unshirkingly, yet without insolence; not as the labourers do, who either stare with sullen ill-will or look on the earth. In brief, freedom and constant contact with nature have made him every inch a man; and here in this nineteenth century of civilised effeminacy may be seen some relic of what men were in the old feudal days when they dwelt practically in the woods. The shoulder of his coat is worn a little where the gun rubs, and so is his sleeve; otherwise he is fairly well dressed.

Perfectly civil to every one, and with a willing manner towards his master and his master’s guests, he has a wonderful knack of getting his own way. Whatever the great house may propose in the shooting line, the keeper is pretty

certain to dispose of in the end as he pleases; for he has a voluble ‘silver’ tongue, and is full of objections, reasons, excuses, suggestions, all delivered with a deprecatory air of superior knowledge which he hardly likes to intrude upon his betters, much as he would regret to see them go wrong. So he really takes the lead, and in nine cases in ten the result proves he is right, as minute local knowledge naturally must be when intelligently applied.

Not only in such matters as the best course for the shooting-party to follow, or in advice bearing upon the preserves, but in concerns of a wider scope, his influence is felt. A keen, shrewd judge of horseflesh—(how is it that if a man understands one animal he seems to instinctively see through all?)—his master in a careless way often asks his opinion before concluding a bargain. Of course the question is not put direct, but ‘By-the-bye, when the hounds were here you saw so-and-so’s mare; what do you think of her?’ The keeper blurts out his answer, not always flattering or very delicately expressed; and his view is not forgotten. For when a trusted servant like this accompanies his master often in solitary rambles for hours together, dignity must unbend now and then, however great the social difference between them; and thus a man of strong individuality and a really valuable gift of observation insensibly guides his master.

Passing across the turnips, the landlord, who perhaps never sees his farms save when thus crossing them with a gun, remarks that they look clean and free from weeds; whereupon the keeper, walking respectfully a little in the rear, replies that so-and-so, the tenant, is a capital farmer, a

preserver of foxes and game, but has suffered from the floods—a reply that leads to inquiries, and perhaps a welcome reduction of rent. On the other hand, the owner's attention is thus often called to abuses. In this way an evilly-disposed keeper may, it is true, do great wrongs, having access to the owner and, in familiar phrase, 'his ear.' I am at present delineating the upright keeper, such as are in existence still, notwithstanding the abuse lavished upon them as a class—often, it is to be feared, too well deserved. It is not difficult to see how in this way a man whose position is lowly may in an indirect way exercise a powerful influence upon a large estate.

He is very 'great' on dogs (and, indeed, on all other animals); his opinion is listened to and taken by everybody round about who has a dog, and sometimes he has three or four under treatment for divers ills. By this knowledge many 'tips' are gained, and occasionally he makes a good thing by selling a pup at a high price. He may even be seen, with his velveteen jacket carefully brushed, his ground-ash stick under his arm, and hat in hand, treading daintily for fear of soiling the carpet with his shoes, in the ante-room, gravely prescribing for the ailing pug in which the ladies are interested.

At the farmhouses he is invited to sit down and take a glass, being welcome for his gossip of the great house, and because, having in the course of years been thrown into the society of all classes, he has gradually acquired a certain tact and power of accommodating himself to his listener. For the keeper, when he fulfils his duty in a quiet way, as a man of experience does, is by no means an unpopular character.

It is the too officious man who creates a feeling among the tenants against himself and the whole question of game. But the quiet experienced hand, with a shrewd knowledge of men as well as the technicalities of his profession, grows to be liked by the tenantry, and becomes a local authority on animal life.

Proud, and not without reason, of his vigour and strength, he will tell you that though between fifty and sixty he can still step briskly through a heavy field-day, despite the weight of reserve ammunition he carries. He can keep on his feet without fatigue from morn till eve, and goes his rounds without abating one inch of the distance. In one thing alone he feels his years—*i.e.* in pace; and when 'young master,' who is a disciple of the modern athletic school, comes out, it is about as much as ever he can do to keep up with him over the stubble. Never once for the last thirty years has he tossed on a bed of sickness; never once has he failed to rise from his slumber refreshed and ready for his labour. His secret is—but let him tell it in his own words:

'It's indoors, sir, as kills half the people; being indoors three parts of the day, and next to that taking too much drink and vittals. Eating's as bad as drinking; and there ain't nothing like fresh air and the smell of the woods. You should come out here in the spring, when the oak timber is throwed (because, you see, the sap be rising, and the bark strips then), and just sit down on a stick fresh peeled—I means a trunk, you know—and sniff up the scent of that there oak bark. It goes right down your throat, and preserves your lungs as the tan do leather. And I've heard say as folk who work in the tan-yards never have no illness. There's always

a smell from trees, dead or living—I could tell what wood a log was in the dark by my nose; and the air is better where the woods be. The ladies up in the great house sometimes goes out into the fir plantations—the turpentine scents strong, you see—and they say it's good for the chest; but, bless you, you must live in it. People go abroad, I'm told, to live in the pine forests to cure 'em: I say these here oaks have got every bit as much good in that way. I never eat but two meals a day—breakfast and supper: what you would call dinner—and maybe in the middle of the day a hunch of dry bread and an apple. I take a deal for breakfast, and I'm rather lear [hungry] at supper; but you may lay your oath that's why I'm what I am in the way of health. People stuffs theirselves, and by consequence it breaks out, you see. It's the same with cattle; they're overfed, tied up in stalls and stuffed, and never no exercise, and mostly oily food too. It stands to reason they must get bad; and that's the real cause of these here rinderpests and pleuro-pneumonia and whatnots. At least that's my notion. I'm in the woods all day, and never comes home till supper—'cept, of course, in breeding-time, to fetch the meal and stuff for the birds—so I gets the fresh air, you see; and the fresh air is the life, sir. There's the smell of the earth, too—'specially just as the plough turns it up—which is a fine thing; and the hedges and the grass are as sweet as sugar after a shower. Anything with a green leaf is the thing, depend upon it, if you want to live healthy. I never signed no pledge; and if a man asks me to take a glass of ale, I never says him no. But I ain't got no barrel at home; and all the time I've been in this here place I've never been to a public. Gentlemen give

me tips—of course they does; and much obliged I be; but I takes it to my missus. Many's the time they've axed me to have a glass of champagne or brandy when we've had lunch under the hedge; but I says no, and would like a glass of beer best, which I gets, of course. No; when I drinks, I drinks ale: but most in general I drinks no strong liquor. Great coat! —cold weather! I never put no great coat on this thirty year. These here woods be as good as a topcoat in cold weather. Come off the open field with the east wind cutting into you, and get inside they firs and you'll feel warm in a minute. If you goes into the ash wood you must go in farther, because the wind comes more between the poles.' Fresh air, exercise, frugal food and drink, the odour of the earth and the trees—these have given him, as he nears his sixtieth year, the strength and vitality of early manhood.

He has his faults: notably, a hastiness of temper towards his undermen, and towards labourers and wood-cutters who transgress his rules. He is apt to use his ground-ash stick rather freely without thought of consequences, and has got into trouble more than once in that way. When he takes a dislike or suspicion of a man, nothing will remove it; he is stubbornly inimical and unforgiving, totally incapable of comprehending the idea of loving an enemy. He hates cordially in the true pagan fashion of old. He is full of prejudices, and has some ideas which almost amount to superstitions; and, though he fears nothing, has a vague feeling that sometimes there is 'summat' inexplicable in the dark and desolate places. Such is this modern man of the woods.