

***RICHARD
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***THE AMATEUR
POACHER***

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The Amateur Poacher

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PREFACE

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The following pages are arranged somewhat in the order of time, beginning with the first gun, and attempts at shooting. Then come the fields, the first hills, and woods explored, often without a gun, or any thought of destruction: and next the poachers, and other odd characters observed at their work. Perhaps the idea of shooting with a matchlock, or wheel-lock, might, if put in practice, at least afford some little novelty.

R.J.

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THE FIRST GUN

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They burned the old gun that used to stand in the dark corner up in the garret, close to the stuffed fox that always grinned so fiercely. Perhaps the reason why he seemed in such a ghastly rage was that he did not come by his death fairly. Otherwise his pelt would not have been so perfect. And why else was he put away up there out of sight?—and so magnificent a brush as he had too. But there he stood, and mounted guard over the old flintlock that was so powerful a magnet to us in those days. Though to go up there alone was no slight trial of moral courage after listening to the horrible tales of the carters in the stable, or the old women who used to sit under the hedge in the shade, on an armful of hay, munching their crusts at luncheon time.

The great cavernous place was full of shadows in the brightest summer day; for the light came only through the

chinks in the shutters. These were flush with the floor and bolted firmly. The silence was intense, it being so near the roof and so far away from the inhabited parts of the house. Yet there were sometimes strange acoustical effects—as when there came a low tapping at the shutters, enough to make your heart stand still. There was then nothing for it but to dash through the doorway into the empty cheese-room adjoining, which was better lighted. No doubt it was nothing but the labourers knocking the stakes in for the railing round the rickyard, but why did it sound just exactly outside the shutters? When that ceased the staircase creaked, or the pear-tree boughs rustled against the window. The staircase always waited till you had forgotten all about it before the loose worm-eaten planks sprang back to their place.

Had it not been for the merry whistling of the starlings on the thatch above, it would not have been possible to face the gloom and the teeth of Reynard, ever in the act to snap, and the mystic noises, and the sense of guilt—for the gun was forbidden. Besides which there was the black mouth of the open trapdoor overhead yawning fearfully—a standing terror and temptation; for there was a legend of a pair of pistols thrown up there out of the way—a treasure-trove tempting enough to make us face anything. But Orion must have the credit of the courage; I call him Orion because he was a hunter and had a famous dog. The last I heard of him he had just ridden through a prairie fire, and says the people out there think nothing of it.

We dragged an ancient linen-press under the trapdoor, and put some boxes on that, and finally a straight-backed

oaken chair. One or two of those chairs were split up and helped to do the roasting on the kitchen hearth. So, climbing the pile, we emerged under the rafters, and could see daylight faintly in several places coming through the starlings' holes. One or two bats fluttered to and fro as we groped among the lumber, but no pistols could be discovered; nothing but a cannon-ball, rusty enough and about as big as an orange, which they say was found in the wood, where there was a brush in Oliver's time.

In the middle of our expedition there came the well-known whistle, echoing about the chimneys, with which it was the custom to recall us to dinner. How else could you make people hear who might be cutting a knobbed stick in the copse half a mile away or bathing in the lake? We had to jump down with a run; and then came the difficulty; for black dusty cobwebs, the growth of fifty years, clothed us from head to foot. There was no brushing or picking them off, with that loud whistle repeated every two minutes.

The fact where we had been was patent to all; and so the chairs got burned—but one, which was rickety. After which a story crept out, of a disjointed skeleton lying in a corner under the thatch. Though just a little suspicious that this might be a *ruse* to frighten us from a second attempt, we yet could not deny the possibility of its being true. Sometimes in the dusk, when I sat poring over 'Koenigsmark, the Robber,' by the little window in the cheese-room, a skull seemed to peer down the trapdoor. But then I had the flintlock by me for protection.

There were giants in the days when that gun was made; for surely no modern mortal could have held that mass of

metal steady to his shoulder. The linen-press and a chest on the top of it formed, however, a very good gun-carriage; and, thus mounted, aim could be taken out of the window at the old mare feeding in the meadow below by the brook, and a 'bead' could be drawn upon Molly, the dairymaid, kissing the fogger behind the hedge, little dreaming that the deadly tube was levelled at them. At least this practice and drill had one useful effect—the eye got accustomed to the flash from the pan, instead of blinking the discharge, which ruins the shooting. Almost everybody and everything on the place got shot dead in this way without knowing it.

It was not so easy as might be supposed to find proper flints. The best time to look for them was after a heavy storm of rain had washed a shallow channel beside the road, when you might select some hardy splinters which had lain hidden under the dust. How we were found out is not quite clear: perhaps the powder left a smell of sulphur for any one who chanced to go up in the garret.

But, however that may be, one day, as we came in unexpectedly from a voyage in the punt, something was discovered burning among the logs on the kitchen hearth; and, though a desperate rescue was attempted, nothing was left but the barrel of our precious gun and some crooked iron representing the remains of the lock. There are things that are never entirely forgotten, though the impression may become fainter as years go by. The sense of the cruel injustice of that act will never quite depart.

But they could not burn the barrel, and we almost succeeded in fitting it to a stock of elder. Elder has a thick pith running down the centre: by removing that the gouge

and chisel had not much work to do to make a groove for the old bell-mouthed barrel to lie in. The matchlock, for as such it was intended, was nearly finished when our hopes were dashed to the ground by a piece of unnatural cunning. One morning the breechpiece that screwed in was missing. This was fatal. A barrel without a breechpiece is like a cup without a bottom. It was all over.

There are days in spring when the white clouds go swiftly past, with occasional breaks of bright sunshine lighting up a spot in the landscape. That is like the memory of one's youth. There is a long dull blank, and then a brilliant streak of recollection. Doubtless it was a year or two afterwards when, seeing that the natural instinct could not be suppressed but had better be recognised, they produced a real gun (single-barrel) for me from the clock-case.

It stood on the landing just at the bottom of the dark flight that led to the garret. An oaken case six feet high or more, and a vast dial, with a mysterious picture of a full moon and a ship in full sail that somehow indicated the quarters of the year, if you had been imitating Rip Van Winkle and after a sleep of six months wanted to know whether it was spring or autumn. But only to think that all the while we were puzzling over the moon and the ship and the queer signs on the dial a gun was hidden inside! The case was locked, it is true; but there are ways of opening locks, and we were always handy with tools.

This gun was almost, but not quite so long as the other. That dated from the time between Stuart and Hanover; this might not have been more than seventy years old. And a beautiful piece of workmanship it was: my new double

breechloader is a coarse common thing to compare with it. Long and slender and light as a feather, it came to the shoulder with wonderful ease. Then there was a groove on the barrel at the breech and for some inches up which caught the eye and guided the glance like a trough to the sight at the muzzle and thence to the bird. The stock was shod with brass, and the trigger-guard was of brass, with a kind of flange stretching half-way down to the butt and inserted in the wood. After a few minutes' polishing it shone like gold, and to see the sunlight flash on it was a joy.

You might note the grain of the barrel, for it had not been browned; and it took a good deal of sand to get the rust off. By aid of a little oil and careful wiping after a shower it was easy to keep it bright. Those browned barrels only encourage idleness. The lock was a trifle dull at first, simply from lack of use. A small screwdriver soon had it to pieces, and it speedily clicked again sweet as a flute. If the hammer came back rather far when at full-cock, that was because the lock had been converted from a flint, and you could not expect it to be absolutely perfect. Besides which, as the fall was longer the blow was heavier, and the cap was sure to explode.

By old farmhouses, mostly in exposed places (for which there is a reason), one or more huge walnut trees may be found. The provident folk of those days planted them with the purpose of having their own gunstocks cut out of the wood when the tree was thrown. They could then be sure it was really walnut, and a choice piece of timber thoroughly well seasoned. I like to think of those times, when men settled themselves down, and planted and planned and laid

out their gardens and orchards and woods, as if they and their sons and sons' sons, to the twentieth generation, were sure to enjoy the fruit of their labour.

The reason why the walnuts are put in exposed places, on the slope of a rise, with open aspect to the east and north, is because the walnut is a foolish tree that will not learn by experience. If it feels the warmth of a few genial days in early spring, it immediately protrudes its buds; and the next morning a bitter frost cuts down every hope of fruit for that year, leaving the leaf as black as may be. Wherefore the east wind is desirable to keep it as backward as possible.

There was a story that the stock of this gun had been cut out of a walnut tree that was thrown on the place by my great-grandfather, who saw it well seasoned, being a connoisseur of timber, which is, indeed, a sort of instinct in all his descendants. And a vast store of philosophy there is in timber if you study it aright.

After cleaning the gun and trying it at a mark, the next thing was to get a good shot with it. Now there was an elm that stood out from the hedge a little, almost at the top of the meadow, not above five-and-twenty yards from the other hedge that bounded the field. Two mounds could therefore be commanded by any one in ambush behind the elm, and all the angular corner of the mead was within range.

It was not far from the house; but the ground sank into a depression there, and the ridge of it behind shut out everything except just the roof of the tallest hayrick. As one sat on the sward behind the elm, with the back turned on

the rick and nothing in front but the tall elms and the oaks in the other hedge, it was quite easy to fancy it the verge of the prairie with the backwoods close by.

The rabbits had scratched the yellow sand right out into the grass—it is always very much brighter in colour where they have just been at work—and the fern, already almost yellow too, shaded the mouths of their buries. Thick bramble bushes grew out from the mound and filled the space between it and the elm: there were a few late flowers on them still, but the rest were hardening into red sour berries. Westwards, the afternoon sun, with all his autumn heat, shone full against the hedge and into the recess, and there was not the shadow of a leaf for shelter on that side.

The gun was on the turf, and the little hoppers kept jumping out of the grass on to the stock: once their king, a grasshopper, alighted on it and rested, his green limbs tipped with red rising above his back. About the distant wood and the hills there was a soft faint haze, which is what Nature finishes her pictures with. Something in the atmosphere which made it almost visible: all the trees seemed to stand in a liquid light—the sunbeams were suspended in the air instead of passing through. The butterflies even were very idle in the slumberous warmth; and the great green dragon-fly rested on a leaf, his tail arched a little downwards, just as he puts it when he wishes to stop suddenly in his flight.

The broad glittering trigger-guard got quite hot in the sun, and the stock was warm when I felt it every now and then. The grain of the walnut-wood showed plainly through the light polish: it was not varnished like the stock of the

double-barrel they kept padlocked to the rack over the high mantelpiece indoors. Still you could see the varnish. It was of a rich dark horse-chestnut colour, and yet so bright and clear that if held close you could see your face in it. Behind it the grain of the wood was just perceptible; especially at the grip, where hard hands had worn it away somewhat. The secret of that varnish is lost—like that of the varnish on the priceless old violins.

But you could feel the wood more in my gun: so that it was difficult to keep the hand off it, though the rabbits would not come out; and the shadowless recess grew like a furnace, for it focussed the rays of the sun. The heat on the sunny side of a thick hedge between three and four in the afternoon is almost tropical if you remain still, because the air is motionless: the only relief is to hold your hat loose; or tilt it against your head, the other edge of the brim on the ground. Then the grass-blades rise up level with the forehead. There is a delicious smell in growing grass, and a sweetness comes up from the earth.

Still it got hotter and hotter; and it was not possible to move in the least degree, lest a brown creature sitting on the sand at the mouth of his hole, and hidden himself by the fern, should immediately note it. And Orion was waiting in the rickyard for the sound of the report, and very likely the shepherd too. We knew that men in Africa, watched by lions, had kept still in the sunshine till, reflected from the rock, it literally scorched them, not daring to move; and we knew all about the stoicism of the Red Indians. But Ulysses was ever my pattern and model: that man of infinite patience and resource.

So, though the sun might burn and the air become suffocating in that close corner, and the quivering line of heat across the meadow make the eyes dizzy to watch, yet not a limb must be moved. The black flies came in crowds; but they are not so tormenting if you plunge your face in the grass, though they titillate the back of the hand as they run over it. Under the bramble bush was a bury that did not look much used; and once or twice a great blue fly came out of it, the buzz at first sounding hollow and afar off and becoming clearer as it approached the mouth of the hole. There was the carcass of a dead rabbit inside no doubt.

A humble-bee wandering along—they are restless things—buzzed right under my hat, and became entangled in the grass by my ear. Now we knew by experience in taking their honey that they could sting sharply if irritated, though good-tempered by nature. How he 'burred' and buzzed and droned!—till by-and-by, crawling up the back of my head, he found an open space and sailed away. Then, looking out again, there was a pair of ears in the grass not ten yards distant: a rabbit had come out at last. But the first delight was quickly over: the ears were short and sharply pointed, and almost pinkly transparent.

What would the shepherd say if I brought home one of his hated enemies no bigger than a rat? The young rabbit made waiting still more painful, being far enough from the hedge to get a clear view into the recess if anything attracted his notice. Why the shepherd hated rabbits was because the sheep would not feed where they had worn their runs in the grass. Not the least movement was possible now—not even that little shifting which makes a

position just endurable: the heat seemed to increase; the thought of Ulysses could hardly restrain the almost irresistible desire to stir.

When, suddenly, there was a slight rustling among the boughs of an oak in the other hedge, as of wings against twigs: it was a woodpigeon, better game than a rabbit. He would, I knew, first look round before he settled himself to preen his feathers on the branch, and, if everything was still while that keen inspection lasted, would never notice me. This is their habit—and the closer you are underneath them the less chance of their perceiving you: for a pigeon perched rarely looks straight downwards. If flying, it is just the reverse; for then they seem to see under them quicker than in any other direction.

Slowly lifting the long barrel of the gun—it was fortunate the sunlight glancing on the bright barrel was not reflected towards the oak—I got it to bear upon the bird; but then came a doubt. It was all eight-and-twenty yards across the angle of the meadow to the oak—a tremendous long shot under the circumstances. For they would not trust us with the large copper powder-flask, but only with a little pistol-flask (it had belonged to the pair of pistols we tried to find), and we were ordered not to use more than a charge and a half at a time. That was quite enough to kill blackbirds. (The noise of the report was always a check in this way; such a trifle of powder only made a slight puff.)

Shot there was in plenty—a whole tobacco-pipe bowl full, carefully measured out of the old yellow canvas money-bag that did for a shot belt. A starling could be knocked off the chimney with this charge easily, and so could a blackbird

roosting in a bush at night. But a woodpigeon nearly thirty yards distant was another matter; for the old folk (and the birdkeepers too) said that their quills were so hard the shot would glance aside unless it came with great force. Very likely the pigeon would escape, and all the rabbits in the buries would be too frightened to come out at all.

A beautiful bird he was on the bough, perched well in view and clearly defined against the sky behind; and my eye travelled along the groove on the breech and up the barrel, and so to the sight and across to him; and the finger, which always would keep time with the eye, pulled at the trigger.

A mere puff of a report, and then a desperate fluttering in the tree and a cloud of white feathers floating above the hedge, and a heavy fall among the bushes. He was down, and Orion's spaniel (that came racing like mad from the rickyard the instant he heard the discharge) had him in a moment. Orion followed quickly. Then the shepherd came up, rather stiff on his legs from rheumatism, and stepped the distance, declaring it was thirty yards good; after which we all walked home in triumph.

Molly the dairymaid came a little way from the rickyard, and said she would pluck the pigeon that very night after work. She was always ready to do anything for us boys; and we could never quite make out why they scolded her so for an idle hussy indoors. It seemed so unjust. Looking back, I recollect she had very beautiful brown eyes.

'You mind you chaws the shot well, measter,' said the shepherd, 'afore you loads th' gun. The more you chaws it the better it sticks the-gither, an' the funder it kills um;' a theory of gunnery that which was devoutly believed in in his

time and long anticipated the wire cartridges. And the old soldiers that used to come round to haymaking, glad of a job to supplement their pensions, were very positive that if you bit the bullet and indented it with your teeth, it was perfectly fatal, no matter to what part of the body its billet took it.

In the midst of this talk as we moved on, I carrying the gun at the trail with the muzzle downwards, the old ramrod, long disused and shrunken, slipped half out; the end caught the ground, and it snapped short off in a second. A terrible disaster this, turning everything to bitterness: Orion was especially wroth, for it was his right next to shoot. However, we went down to the smithy at the inn, to take counsel of the blacksmith, a man of knowledge and a trusty friend. 'Aha!' said he, 'it's not the first time I've made a ramrod. There's a piece of lancewood in the store overhead which I keep on purpose; it's as tough as a bow—they make carriage-shafts of it; you shall have a better rod than was ever fitted to a Joe Manton.' So we took him down some pippins, and he set to work on it that evening.