

THE POACHER AND HIS CRAFT.

"'Tis my delight on a shiny night
In the season of the year."



THE Lincolnshire poet who wrote the above famous lines was not by any means a practical poacher, for few votaries of this most exhilarating of all unlicensed sport would consider a "shiny night" the most delightful upon

which to go forth and make a big bag. However, I have known one moorland poacher who did well on bright moonlight nights. He used to select a time when the ground was thickly covered with snow, and the moon at full, and then saunter forth with a white cotton shirt, and drawers made of the same material, donned over his ordinary clothes. By this means he was enabled to creep unseen upon a flock of unsuspecting grouse as they slept on the snow, and deal out death with his trusty old single barrel.

Kingsley described a gamekeeper as a poacher turned outside in, and a poacher as a gamekeeper inside out, and he was entirely accurate, without saying a disparaging word of either class. Some of the best keepers I have known have been guilty of a bit of poaching before they donned the velveteen, and some of the worst, that is to say cleverest, poachers have been ex-gamekeepers.

This is easily understood when it is explained that a man who becomes really successful as a gamekeeper or poacher must possess more than ordinary intelligence, an infinitude of patience and resource, a strong constitution, be capable of enduring great physical strains, and, above all, be intimately acquainted with field-craft.

Our first illustration shows a poacher awaiting the arrival of a fast-approaching hare to his net. This particular branch of poaching is generally practised on dull autumn and winter nights, although I have seen it done—and successfully, too—in broad daylight by an impudent gang of the fraternity.

Genuine hare poaching needs a good deal of close observation, and the man who practises it is incessantly at work making

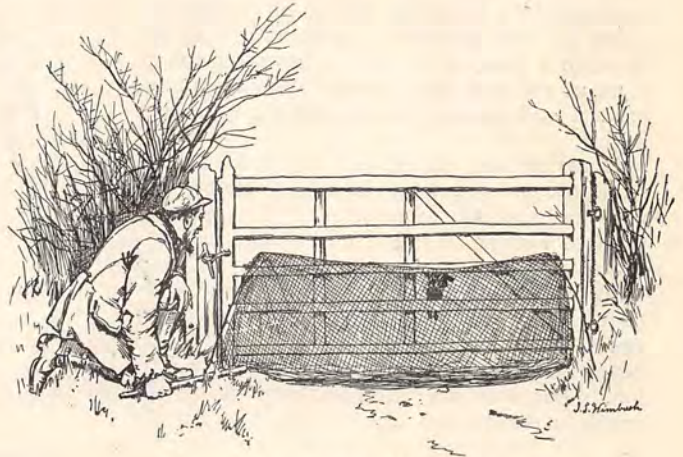
mental notes, and, were he so minded, could tell you from memory where half the hares of a countryside fed by night and sat by day. A dab of mud in a field gap, the condition of a gate's bars, holes in stone walls and hedges, all speak volumes to him. He has also to note carefully the habits and movements of both gamekeepers and policemen, and direct his operations accordingly.

The most successful poachers generally have but one partner in their business, and, though very much awake, he is an entirely silent one on all occasions—*i.e.* an intelligent lurcher.

On commencing business, the nocturnal sportsman sees that the wind, be it much or little, does not blow from him to his quarry. He then spreads a specially made net across the gateway or gap used by the hare for entering and leaving a field (as indicated in our illustration), and either supports it by a slender twig driven into the ground at each end, or by a couple of locks of wool thrust into the crevices of a stone wall. As soon as the net is set, the dog is told to "go," and understanding his work



PREPARATIONS FOR MARKET. DUSTING SHOT INTO NETTED PART-RIDGES.



NET SET FOR A HARE.

thoroughly, away he slips along the wall or hedgerow side like a shadow. He soon discovers the game, and makes a tremendous rush for it. A great deal depends upon a swift, hard run, for this does not give the hare time to consider any but her usual exit, supposing her suspicions should have been aroused. Directly a hare strikes the net she rolls over and over, completely entangling herself within

had wrenched it off and escaped. At last the leg of a sheep that had died near by was cut off and thrust into one of the traps, and this final piece of ridicule made the old man relinquish poaching for ever.

This particular animal is very fond of parsley, and sometimes a whiff of blue smoke appears at the window of a labourer's sleeping-room in the very early morning, and beans and bacon give place to "bossed" hare the following Sunday.

Partridges whilst "jugging," as their method of roosting upon the ground is called, are often caught by means of drag-nets. As the whole covey, with exception of perhaps the old male, who generally sleeps apart and acts the sentinel, huddles together in a crowded circle, with each bird's tail meeting in the centre, it is a comparatively easy matter to kill the mother and all her promising sons and daughters, often at one swoop.

The operator must in this particular branch of poaching have a mate to take charge of one end of the net, which is silently swept across a field with the top considerably in front of the bottom, which touches the ground all the way. Directly a covey is disturbed, each member makes a sudden spring into the air, and accordingly becomes entangled in the net, which is instantly dropped for the reaping of the harvest.

To prevent this kind of poaching, gamekeepers bush the fields frequented by partridges, and thus put an effectual stop to netting.

Partridges are also trapped at their "dusting" places, which they frequent for the purpose of obtaining the equivalent to a good



KEEPER "BUSHING" A FIELD.

its fatal meshes, and at the same time giving voice to an ear-piercing shriek. This it is the poacher's business to stop instantly, and be off as sharp as possible to fresh woods and pastures new. A well-trained lurcher will not even come in to a kill, and rarely shows itself during a whole evening's work.

Gamekeepers net hares early in the autumn, and release them again. In Yorkshire this practice is known as "mistetching," and a hare that has once suffered the extreme fright occasioned by wriggling within the meshes of a net for five minutes on end will rarely go through a gateway or stile afterwards, and it is no uncommon thing to see such an animal jump a wall (which she does sideways) six feet high.

Hares are also snared and trapped. I used to know an old man in whose blood the poaching instinct ran so strongly that, though reduced almost to ineptitude by age and infirmity, he would persist in trying to trap hares in "sheep creeps" (holes in stone walls to let sheep through from one field to another) and watercourse holes. The keeper on whose beat this occurred knew full well the guilty hand, but was far too good-natured to do anything except tease the old fellow by "striking" his traps, and occasionally putting the leg of a hare in one, to make him believe she



POLICEMAN TAPPING THE POCKETS FOR NET OR PEGS.

wash. Some poachers call the birds by means of a tailor's thimble with a piece of parchment fastened tightly over the end, and a horsehair or piece of catgut passed through a pin-hole in the centre. By holding one end of the hair or catgut between the teeth, and

and yet the men who pay lavish sums to breed and rear them are absolutely helpless to stop it. It happens in this way. An old poacher will get hold by some strange means of a small piece of heather-clad freehold, surrounded by good grouse moors. On the 12th



NETTING RABBITS.

twisting the opposite one round the forefinger of either hand, the other is left at liberty to run the thimble up and down, and thus reproduce very cleverly and accurately the peculiar skirling call-note of the partridge. By this means the bird can be lured within a very short distance of the operator, and despatched by one of his numerous engines of destruction.

Grouse are very conservative birds in regard to their lines of flight when disturbed, and are consequently captured by the erection of large nets. Thousands are nowadays killed in the most barefaced and provoking manner,

of August—St. Grouse Day—he sticks the place full of snares, and erects huge nets round about it. Directly the beaters begin to drive and the guns to fire, the grouse-spider (for such he may not inaptly be termed) begins to reap his rich harvest.

Grouse love solitude and peace; consequently, in their endeavours to escape the turmoil and dangers of being driven to and fro across a line of fire-belching breechloaders, they make for what appears to be a haven of rest, but is simply a death-trap. Those that escape the nets and alight in the poacher's

preserve begin to run about in their agitation and fright, and unsuspectingly put their heads through the noose of a snare and are hanged.

One of the best grouse moors in the world suffers from such a terribly vexatious and yet remediless thorn in the side, and I have heard that the poacher renting it has upon one occasion secured a cartload of birds in a single day. It is not illegal to snare or net grouse, except on Sundays, and poaching freeholders are sometimes prosecuted for having their snares down on the Sabbath, and, needless to say, heavily fined. This is easily understood when it is mentioned that a magistrate

recently volunteered the confession that he regarded poaching as a crime little less hideous than murder itself.

Grouse are also procured by what is known as "becking," which simply consists in partially stopping the nostrils by holding the nose and then imitating the call-note of the female bird at the first peep of day. The males will then fly up, and with a resounding "*Cabow, cabow, cabeck, cabeck, beck, beck, beck,*" pitch on some small eminence, known as a "knowe," close by, and begin to reconnoitre. The best call can, however, be reproduced by means of a clay-pipe, with which I would undertake to deceive, without any intention of boasting, the most experienced naturalist, gamekeeper, shepherd, or grouse that ever crossed a moor. I have on many occasions called grouse to within a few feet of me.

Curiously enough, when a number of birds are together near one of these "knowes," and one happens to be shot off the top, if the poacher keeps well out of sight, another will run up and occupy the post of vantage. An old poacher in the North once shot six or seven off a hillock in quick succession, and so persistently did a fresh bird appear after each kill that he began to be suspicious of either a keeper's trick or the work of the supernatural.

The most ingenious method of poaching grouse ever invented is practised during the winter time in Scotland. When snow lies pretty thickly upon the ground and is fairly solid, the poacher goes forth armed with a champagne bottle and a quantity of oats. He thrusts the bottle into the deep snow cork first, and then throws a few oats in and around the hole thus produced. The hungry birds peck up all the grain lying on the surface of the snow, and in straining to reach that at the bottom of the holes, overbalance themselves and fall head foremost into the pit, which, from its peculiar shape and depth, renders any movement of the wings entirely impossible.

In some parts of the country poachers are reputed to fire dust shot into the bodies of netted birds, as shown in our head-piece, but although it may serve as a useful deception in disposing of the game, I am inclined to think that not many poachers would treat themselves to the free advertisement our friend in the picture is enjoying.

Great numbers of rabbits are killed on suitably dark and windy nights by gangs of poachers, who slip quietly between some thickly-stocked wood and the fields in which its inhabitants feed, and quietly erect their long nets. As soon as all is ready, the faithful



KEEPERS GOING THEIR ROUNDS.



POACHER GROUNDED BY KEEPER.

lurcher is released, and the tun commences, as shown in the picture.

In great game-preserving districts the police have a deal of work to do in concert with gamekeepers, and sometimes effect smart captures, although I would at any time back a really experienced poacher against half a dozen constables, where a deep scheme and a level head to carry it out form part of the programme.

Poaching, both as a craft and a crime, is very much on the wane, and the work of gamekeepers has become mere child's play compared with what it was when the North country poet wrote :

"The miners of Weardale are all valiant men,
And will fight till they die for the bonny moorhen,"
in response to a threat to stop their grouse poaching operations by the help of the "red-coats."

In those days the Weardale miners turned out in armed gangs, forty or fifty strong, and took a keeper-defying sort of holiday on the best Yorkshire moors near Barnard Castle. Their raids became so intolerable, both to game-preservers and moorland farmers, whose victuals they seized without question or request, that at last the military was called out for their suppression.

The above kind of cool impudence is to-day practised by a very different stamp of man—the gentleman poacher. This individual will suddenly turn up what Southern gamekeepers would call "a howling toff," with a splendid fit-out, including, perhaps, a brace of first-rate spaniels, on a nice little preserve, and ask for Mr. So-and-so, the tenant of the shoot, from whom it is more than probable he will produce a letter of invitation for a day's sport. When he finds that the master of the ceremonies is not upon the ground, he will fall into a fit of assumed rage, and criticise both forcibly and freely the caddish conduct of Mr. So-and-so. This and the forged letter will, as a rule, take the gamekeeper off his guard, and anxious to make amends for his master's shortcomings, he takes the disappointed guest on to the very best ground, where he enjoys a good day's sport, being, as a rule, an excellent shot; and after making the man he has duped happy with a free flow of Scotch whisky and a sovereign, he takes his departure, carrying along with him a splendid haul of game. This class of poacher, needless to state, is not a very numerous one, as it requires some extraordinary qualifications.

A man who made havoc amongst the

grouse of a North Yorkshire moor was several times chased into a wayside cottage occupied by an old woman. Although diligently searched for in every corner of the building, he was never discovered. It afterwards transpired that he had dug out the ashpit until it was sufficiently large to contain his body, and that directly he had tucked himself away the old woman raked out the grate-bars and thus removed all chance of suspicion in that direction.

An old trout poacher once told me that when the water bailiffs and police had reduced his capture to a moral certainty as they thought, he plunged into a deep and rapid river, gave a drowning man's shriek, and floated silently away into darkness and safety under an overhanging bank.

The romance of poaching, and the doubtful ownership of what is in one man's field to-day and in that of another to-morrow, have supplied the man who practises it with a great deal of popular sympathy; and an instance is on record of an entirely innocent individual, on seeing an injured poacher with a large family hard pressed by pursuing game-keepers, taking from the guilty man nets and other evidence, and allowing himself to be captured and convicted in place of the real culprit.

Desperate affrays sometimes take place between gangs of the rougher and clumsier kind of poachers and the guardians of game, and I know one keeper not far from the Metropolis who carries more than forty pellets in his body because he dared to pursue and pass the poacher's mark. The same man also has his temples terribly scarred from kicks, and his hands also from the savage bites of inhuman ruffians. He told me that on one occasion he had two hundred coops of young pheasants, averaging nine birds each, stolen in a single night, although they were being watched by two under-keepers and a retriever dog.

A head keeper I know, in the finest game-preserving district of East Anglia, guards his pheasant coops by stretching an almost invisible wire right round them. One end of this wire is fixed to the trigger of an alarm-gun, which is situated close to where he sleeps.

Dogs are very quick at hearing, and some of them exceedingly useful in a desperate hand-to-hand encounter; but the law says that they shall be muzzled when they are employed, as we see the one in our illustration.

A great deal of salmon poaching is done in the autumn, when the fish ascend small streams for the purpose of depositing their spawn. They are killed generally at night-time by the aid of a bull's-eye lantern and a harpoon-like kind of spear.

The following curious salmon-poaching incident, which very nearly ended in an awful tragedy, was told me by one of the gang of poachers who took part in it. Whilst some of the members raided part of the Eden, in Westmoreland, others were told off to watch for the police and water bailiffs.

During the course of the evening, one of the watchers observed a belted man stealthily approaching the part of the river where the salmon-spearing was in full swing, and straightway disposed of the intruder by hurling him bodily into a deep pool. Directly the victim of foul play began to scramble up the bank, his assailant made an attempt to throw him in again, but suddenly desisted and slunk away, when the half-drowned man cried out in alarm. The fact was that the poacher had recognised through the cry that he had thrown his own father into the river. The old man had been returning from some pig-killing excursion amongst the hills, and seeing a light flashing about by the river, crept up to see what it was, forgetful of the fact that his knife-belt outside his top-coat gave him the look of a constable.

R. KEARTON.

