EDWARD BERENS

CHRISTMAS STORIES

Edward Berens

Christmas Stories

Berens E.

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Содержание

Christmas Stories / Containing John Wildgoose the Poacher, the Smuggler, and Good-nature, or Parish Matters

THE HISTORY OF JOHN WILDGOOSE. ADVERTISEMENT

The Author of the following Tale has, for some time, wished to put together a little Tract on the evil and danger of *poaching*; an offence which so often leads on to the most immoral habits, and the most heinous crimes. It seemed that his object might be answered by the aid of narrative and dialogue, more effectually than by a regular and continued discourse. If it should be thought, in any degree, worthy of standing on the same shelf with "Trimmer's Instructive Tales," and the "Cheap Repository Tracts," the ambition of the Author will be gratified.

Jan. 27, 1821.

THE HISTORY OF JOHN WILDGOOSE

Thomas Wildgoose was an honest and hard-working man, in one of the midland counties. He had long been attached to Susan Jenkins, a well-behaved young woman of the same village; but from prudence and a proper independence of mind, he determined not to take a wife until he had a house to bring her to, as well as some prospect of providing for a family without being a burthen to the farmers, who were already complaining of the pressure of the poor-rates.

In consequence of his good character he was never out of work; and though his wages were not high, yet he almost every week contrived to put by something, which he deposited in a bank for savings, lately established in the neighbouring market town. His weekly deposits were not very large sums, yet "many a little makes a mickle." This was helped out by a legacy of thirty pounds from an uncle; so that in a few years he was enabled to purchase a cottage with a small garden, and had still something over for a few articles of furniture. Susan, meanwhile, had gone on steadily in service, always making a point of putting by some part of her wages; so that when they married, they were comparatively rich. For some time after his marriage Wildgoose continued to work for his old master; and Susan, by field work in the hay-making and harvest, and by taking in sewing at other times of the year, was able to earn a good deal towards maintaining their children. The wants of an increasing family, however, led him to consider how he might enlarge his means of subsistence; and the success of an old acquaintance in the adjoining village, determined him to endeavour to purchase a horse and cart, and commence business as a higler.

A higler's business is liable to so many chances, and takes a man so much from home, that perhaps he would have acted more wisely if he had stuck to work. We cannot however blame him for endeavouring to better his circumstances in an honest way. Though he occasionally met with some losses from bad debts, yet upon the whole he did pretty well.

One day in November, as he was returning home from market rather late in the evening, and was walking quietly by the side of the cart, he was suddenly startled by a rattling noise behind him; and turning round, saw the True Blue stage driving furiously along the road, and the Opposition coach a short distance behind. Wildgoose immediately went to his horse's head, and drew his cart as close as he could to the hedge; but just at that moment the Opposition coach had got up with the other, and in endeavouring to pass it, one of the leaders knocked poor Wildgoose down, and the wheels went over him. The unfeeling coachmen were too eager in the race to attend to the mischief which they had occasioned; and the poor man was left lying in the road, until two neighbouring farmers, returning from market, found him, and brought him home, more dead than alive, in his own cart. At first some faint expectations were entertained of his recovery; but soon it was found that the injury which he had sustained was too serious to admit of hope.

Mr. Hooker, the clergyman of the parish, came to visit him frequently, for the purpose both of assisting his devotions, and of comforting his poor wife: and on one of these occasions he took an opportunity of asking him, in as kind a manner as possible, whether he had settled his worldly affairs. This certainly had not occurred to Wildgoose: when, however, Mr. Hooker explained to him, that if he died without a will, his house and garden would all go to his eldest son, subject to dower to his wife; and that in strictness of law his household furniture, shop-goods, and cart and horse, would be to be divided in three parts, one to his wife, and two between his children; he saw the propriety of arranging these matters while he was able. Mr. Smith the attorney was accordingly sent for. Poor Wildgoose, who had reason to have full confidence in the good sense and judgment of his wife, and in her impartial affection to her children, felt that he could not do better than leave every thing to her, at the same time constituting her sole executrix. He knew that she would consider herself as a trustee for the children, felt sure that she would not marry again, and thought it best not to fetter her by any minute directions. Mr. Smith prepared the will accordingly; and as three witnesses are necessary to a

will bequeathing a freehold, their good neighbour Simpson the tailor was called in, who together with Mr. Hooker and Mr. Smith attested Wildgoose's execution of the will. When this was done, the poor man felt his mind relieved: and endeavoured more and more to detach his thoughts from all earthly cares, and to fix them on subjects connected with those unseen things which are eternal. The next day he received the sacrament, which he had been in the habit of receiving frequently during his life; and before the end of the week he died.

Poor Susan had been for some time preparing for this sad event; but still when it actually happened, it seemed to come upon her by surprise. She felt quite stunned by the blow. At first, she could attend to, could think of, nothing but her own loss, her own sad and desolate condition. She was however soon enabled to turn for support to that Being, who bids the widow to trust in him, and who promises to protect the fatherless children. Her mind found a comfort in prayer; and the sort of strain and oppression which she felt through her whole frame was soon relieved by a flood of tears. The necessity of acting forced her to rouse and exert herself. Her husband had desired to be buried in as plain and simple a manner as possible; and she felt that she shewed him more real respect by complying with this direction, than by spending in useless shew that money which was wanted to provide necessaries for the children.

Thomas had been one of the singers. The band accordingly met, and shewed their respect to his memory by singing the funeral psalm, after the conclusion of the beautiful and impressive lesson in the burial service. Poor Susan, who was naturally a strong-minded woman, had been able so far to exert herself as to attend the last sad ceremony, but had nearly sunk while the psalm was singing. She felt, however, the ground of consolation suggested to her by the service. When the clergyman read, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord," and again, when he spoke of "the souls of the faithful after they are delivered from the burden of the flesh being in joy and felicity with the Lord," she felt an humble trust that these words were applicable to her dear departed husband. Deep therefore and acute as her sorrow was, she endeavoured to comply with the admonition of the holy apostle St. Paul, "not to be sorry as one without hope."

She had little time, however, for the indulgence of grief. The circumstances of her family made it absolutely necessary for her to consider by what means she should provide for them. One of her first cares was to administer to the will. Mr. Hooker told her that she was liable to a heavy penalty if she neglected this; and that though the penalty was seldom levied, she was hardly complete executrix until it was done. The next thing to be considered was, how she could get a living without being a burden to the parish. Once she had some thoughts of carrying on the higling business herself; but the being taken so much from her home and children, and several other circumstances, convinced her that this plan was not advisable. She therefore determined to sell the horse and cart, and set up a shop, for which there was a fair opening in the village, without doing injury to any of her neighbours.

It went to her heart to part with the horse, which had been her dear husband's fellow-traveller in so many journeys, and of which he had taken such good care; but prudence forbad her to give way to feelings of this nature. She therefore endeavoured to find for him a kind master, and got quite as good a price as she could expect. The cart too sold for as much as it was worth; and with the money which was thus produced, she was enabled to open her shop with a good supply of articles purchased at the ready money price. One plan, which she very early adopted, may be worth the attention of those who are engaged in the same business. She soon contrived to learn, what was the usual rate of profit, which the shops in the neighbourhood made upon the articles which they sold. They all sold upon credit, and of course lost a good deal by bad debts. Mrs. Wildgoose would gladly have sold nothing but for ready money; but as she soon found that this was out of the question, partly because some of the poor were irregularly paid by their employers, and partly from other causes, she adopted the following plan. In general she gave the same credit as the other shops, and thought it fair to make the same profit, but always gladly gave up half the profit to a ready money customer.

Three of her children were able to make themselves of use. John, the eldest, who was now eleven years old, was employed by a farmer at seven-pence per day. Mary, the next, assisted in washing and mending, and in taking care of little Sarah while her mother was in the shop; and Sam could earn two shillings a week, sometimes by pig-keeping, and sometimes by jingling a sheep-bell, to keep the birds from the corn.

And here I must just mention by the bye a scrape that little Sam once got into. He was sitting on the watch, under a hedge close to the public road, when a flight of pigeons settled on the wheat. Up jumped Sam, and, all at once, began hallooing as loud as his lungs would let him, and making the most alarming noise with his bell. He succeeded in driving off the plunderers but, unluckily, the suddenness of the noise close by the road so frightened the horse of a gentleman who was riding by, that he turned short round, and threw his rider into the dirt. The gentleman was not much hurt, but a good deal out of temper; and vented his anger by giving a few cuts with his whip to the boy, who caused his disaster. Poor Sam meant no harm; but perhaps he deserved some punishment, as his thoughtlessness in making a sudden noise so near the public road, might have been the occasion of a broken limb, or even a more serious accident.

Notwithstanding a few occasional rubs and grievances, the family for some time got on pretty well; but there was something in the character of her eldest son, which gave Mrs. Wildgoose much uneasiness. He had, I am afraid, been rather spoilt from his infancy. Both father and mother were so fond of their first child, that they humoured him in every thing. Whatever he cried for he was almost sure to have, and this mistaken indulgence made him, from very early years, selfish, and wilful. Care and diligence afterwards, prospered by the grace of God, may certainly correct the effects of early spoiling; but, though they had so many other good qualities, the parents of John Wildgoose had not been sufficiently aware of the necessity of paying attention to the forming of his temper and principles. For a few years he was sent to the day school, and learnt to read tolerably well; but when he was between eight and nine years old, he was taken to work; and employed, sometimes by the farmers, sometimes to go on errands for his father. He felt his father's death a good deal, and for some time seemed anxious to do what he could to assist his mother. He stuck to his work, and regularly brought his earnings home; and was kind to his brother and sisters. Soon, however, the wilfulness of his character began again to shew itself, and gained strength by being no longer checked by the authority of a father. His mother was grieved to find that he would often go his own way instead of complying with her wishes. One of his principal faults at this time was a neglect of the Lord's day. He seldom came to church; and when he did happen to come, was inattentive to every part of the service. Mr. Hooker several times endeavoured to persuade him to come to the Sunday school; he told him that one principal use of such schools was the enabling those boys, who were engaged in labour during the week, to keep up and to improve the learning which they had acquired at the day school before they went to work; but he would not be persuaded. In spring he was bird's nesting; in summer he was lying on the grass, or bathing in the river; in autumn he was nutting, and, I am sorry to say, was sometimes guilty of making an inroad on a neighbour's orchard; and in winter he was engaged in sliding on the ice, hunting squirrels, or some other diversion. Both his mother and Mr. Hooker lamented this, and in the kindest manner endeavoured to make him sensible of the folly of his conduct. He received their admonitions in sullen silence; and instead of feeling, as he ought to have felt, that their advice proceeded from a regard for his welfare, seemed to think that it was meant to answer some object of their own.

When he was just past seventeen, he unluckily struck up a close intimacy with a young man in the village, a few years older than himself. His name was William Atkins, but he was usually called Black Will. Atkins was a lively fellow, with a good deal of coarse humour. He was one of those men who neither fear God nor regard man, and who take pleasure in turning religion and every thing serious into ridicule. With him young Wildgoose passed many of his leisure hours; and sometimes

on a Sunday evening they used to join a party of idlers at the Fighting Cocks, a lone public house, about a quarter of a mile from the village.

Mrs. Wildgoose saw the intimacy which her son had formed with great pain, and repeatedly cautioned him against it. "Jack," she one day said to him, "I do wish from my heart that you would not keep company with that Will Atkins. I am sure no good can come of it." "Why, mother," answered Jack, "what harm is there in poor Will? He is a good-humoured fellow, that loves a joke; and, I'm sure, he's always very kind and friendly to me." "As pleasant as you may find him," replied his mother, "you know that he bears but a middling character." "Yes," said the son, "but I shall take care not to be hurt by that." "Don't be too sure," rejoined she; "the *Good Book* tells us, that *evil communications corrupt good manners, that he that toucheth pitch shall be defiled therewith*, and that *the companion of fools shall be destroyed*." Jack never liked any thing approaching to a lecture; and sulkily saying, "I think, mother, I'm old enough now to judge for myself," left the house.

Black Will, among other qualifications, possessed that of being an experienced poacher; and it was not long before he let John Wildgoose into the art and mystery of this species of marauding. He used to tell him stories of his dexterity in eluding the keepers, of his skill in entrapping the game, of the fine sums of money he made by it, and of the jolly parties which that money enabled them to have at the Fighting Cocks. Jack was amused with his stories, and began very soon to think that he should like to have a share in these adventures. As a boy he was always fond of bird's nesting, and bat fowling, and was eager to try his hand upon game of a higher description. Will was ready enough to lead him on. The next autumn he gave him a few wires, taught him how to set them in the most likely places, and how to make more. Young Wildgoose was at this time employed in keeping sheep, and was with them early and late. His friend instructed him to set his wires in the evening, and when he returned to his flock in the morning, to go round and see how they had succeeded. When he found a hare, he directly hid it in a ditch, or some snug place, till dark, and then carried it to Atkins, who used to meet him for this purpose near the Fighting Cocks. Secretly as he managed this, he did not escape the vigilant eye of Sir John's keeper; but besides that he felt for the young man's mother, and therefore was unwilling to expose him, he thought that he should do his master and the public more service by discovering the receiver of the hares, than by proceeding against the catcher of them. He had seen the direction which young Wildgoose usually took when he left his sheep, and contrived one night to station himself so, that he witnessed his meeting with Atkins, and saw the latter directly carry the booty into the public house. Stephen Tomkins the landlord was a keen, knowing kind of person. Though he sold a good deal of beer, yet he chose to say that he could not get his bread by keeping to his regular business, and had many other ways of earning a few shillings. Among the rest, he kept a horse and cart, with which he travelled every week as a higler, either to the county town, or wherever else suited his purpose. The game-keeper had long suspected him of carrying game, but had never been able actually to catch him. What he now saw, added to some private information which he had received, satisfied him that his suspicions were just. Early next morning therefore he applied for a warrant to search for game, and waited with the constable and two other men at the turn of the road, before you come to the turnpike at the entrance of the town. About the hour they reckoned upon, Tomkins's cart made its appearance, and they sallied out from the hovel where they had concealed themselves. Tomkins, upon being desired to stop, at first looked a little frightened, but soon contrived to put a good face upon the business. When they shewed him their warrant, he pretended to be surprised, and affronted that they should suspect such a man as him of any thing improper; at the same time asserting with many oaths, that he had nothing in his cart but a few fowls and the butter which he had collected from the dairymen. The keepers, however, insisted upon searching; and were so long before they succeeded, that they almost thought that he had got some hint of their intentions. At last, however, quite at the bottom of the cart, under butter baskets, fowls, and other commodities of the same nature, they discovered first one hare, then a second, then a third. As it was market day, the magistrates were holding their usual petty sessions. The keepers immediately

carried Stephen Tomkins and the hares into the justice room. The regular steps having been gone through, and the witnesses sworn and examined, Tomkins had not a word to say in his defence. Mr. Hale, therefore, who acted as chairman of the bench, proceeded to conviction, and addressed him in the following words.

"Stephen Tomkins, you have been convicted upon the clearest evidence of having game in your possession in your higler's cart, by which offence you have incurred the penalty of 15[English Pound]; that is, 5[English Pound] for each head of game, half to the informer and half to the poor of the parish[a]. The law does not give us the power of mitigating this penalty; and even if it did, we probably should not feel that there was any cause for mitigation. The offence of which you are convicted is one, the effects of which are very mischievous. It has been said, that if there were no receivers of stolen goods there would be no thieves: and it may be said, with equal truth, that there would be few poachers if there were no clandestine receivers of game. Such men as you encourage thoughtless young men in this manner to break the laws of their country, and to take to a course of life which often brings them to an untimely end. We hope that this conviction will be a warning to you, and will induce you to desist from such practices."

[a] See Note [A.]

Tomkins said, that it was very hard that he should have to pay so heavy a fine, only for having a few hares in his cart; and did not see how he was more to blame than the poulterer, to whom he was going to send them, or than the gentlemen who bought them of the poulterers. Mr. Hale replied, that he and his brother justices sat there to execute the laws, and had not time to discuss the propriety of them, or the cases of other offenders who were not before them. "As for you, Mr. Tomkins," he continued, "for the reasons which I have given, I do not think your punishment at all too severe: at all events, it is the punishment prescribed by law, which we are bound to inflict. As for those other persons to whom you allude, a poulterer exposing game for sale, and a gentleman or other person *buying it*[b], are liable to the same penalty, and if they should be brought before us with sufficient evidence against them, it would be our duty to convict them. Perhaps I might also feel it right to give them the same admonition that I have given you. I might feel it right to hint to them, as I have done to you, that they are encouraging poor men to break the laws by poaching, and that they are in one point of view more to blame than the poachers themselves. A poacher often pleads distress and poverty. This is no excuse for him, but can certainly often be pleaded with truth. Now, certainly, a poor, uneducated man, who breaks the laws through distress – though mind, I again say, that that is no excuse for him – must in one point of view at least, be considered as less blameable than he who knowingly breaks them for the purpose of mere gain, or, than he who violates them for the sake of gratifying his appetite or his vanity, by seeing game upon his table."

[b] See Note [B.]

Tomkins had nothing more to say, excepting that he had not the money by him, and wanted a little time to raise it. The justices therefore allowed him to defer the payment till that day fortnight.

When the culprit returned into the market-place, he pretended to make light of the affair; and calling at the Red Lion for a pot of ale with some gin in it, drank "good luck to poaching," and affected to laugh at the magistrates. Fifteen pounds, however, was really a heavy pull upon Tomkins's purse, and whatever he might pretend, it weighed upon his mind a good deal.

When he got back to his own house, he was loud in expressing his ill humour against Mr. Hale, and the whole bench of justices: and uttered against them the most dreadful curses. "Come, come, Stephen," said old Truman, his father-in-law, who was quietly sitting in the chimney-corner, "come, come, you are going a little too far; I am sorry for many reasons that you have got into this scrape, and don't wonder at your being vexed; but what right have you to cry out so against Mr. Hale?" – "Right!" said Tomkins, "right enough, I think. Why, has'nt he fined me fifteen pounds?" – "Yes; but could he do otherwise? Every magistrate, you know, is sworn to execute the laws to the best of his judgment.

If, after such clear evidence, he had let you off, he would have broken his oath, and have acted ill towards the public at large, and unjustly towards those who are entitled to receive the money. Besides, Stephen, you don't suppose, because a magistrate punishes you as an *offender*, that he bears any ill will to you as a *man*. Excepting on licensing-day, he probably never saw you before, and never thought about you one way or the other." – "Well then," said Tomkins, "I hate him for being a magistrate at all." – "Now there you're wrong again," said the old man; "I'm sure we all ought to be very thankful to those gentlemen, who will undertake such a troublesome office, especially as they get nothing by it. There are few people in these days that will work without pay. The judges get some thousands a year, and a pension when they are too old for service. I do not wish them one farthing less, for they deserve richly all they get, and are, generally speaking, an honour to the country. The attorneys too, if you have any dealings with them, come pretty quick upon you with their three-and-fourpences, and their six-and-eightpences; and the counsellors seldom open their mouths under a guinea or two. Tho' here again I must say, that I don't think either of these sorts of lawyers over-paid, when you consider how many years most of them work before they get any thing, (many, I believe, never get any thing at all.) The gentlemen, however, who act as justices, give their time and attention for nothing, and run the risk of giving offence to many of their neighbours into the bargain. No one, I'm sure, will undertake the office, who values his own ease, and quiet, and comfort, at a higher rate than the being of use to his neighbours and the public." – "I wish," said Tomkins peevishly, "there were no such things as laws or magistrates in the world." – "Like enough, like enough," replied Truman, "men are apt to quarrel with the laws when the laws are too hard for 'em. You don't often look into the Bible, Stephen, but that would tell you, that the magistrate *beareth not the sword in vain, but is an avenger to execute wrath upon every soul that doeth evil*. It is, therefore, natural for a man, who has done evil, or who means to do evil, to wish that there was no such check upon him. But those who, instead of doing evil, wish to lead quiet and peaceable lives in an honest way, are glad to have the laws to protect them from evil doers, and are thankful to those who duly execute them."

Tomkins did not much like Truman's lecture, and instead of being benefited by it, retained in his heart all his ill-will against Mr. Hale. In this he was not only very wrong, but, I am disposed to think, more unreasonable than the generality of men who may be in the same unlucky circumstances with himself. For men, who are convicted upon sufficient evidence, have generally the sense to see that the magistrate who convicts them, merely does his bounden duty. Tomkins put common sense and reason out of the question, and determined to do something by way of revenge. Mr. Hale's house was situated about seven miles off. It stood at the extremity of a rather extensive paddock, at the other end of which was a large fish pond, well stored with jack and perch. Tomkins knew the pond well, and took it into his head, that he would make it refund part of his fifteen pounds. He communicated his plan to Will Atkins, young Wildgoose, and Mike Simmons, who readily entered into it. They heard that Mr. Hale was from home for a few days, and determined to execute their plan without delay. They accordingly furnished themselves with a large net, and in the dusk of the evening proceeded to a barn, at a little distance from Mr. Hale's grounds. Here they concealed themselves till towards twelve o'clock at night. They then got over the pales, and were just beginning to open their net, when they were alarmed by the sound of horses coming swiftly along the road. They thought themselves safe from the owner of the pond, but were of course afraid of being seen at that time of night by any one else, and crouched down to avoid observation. In this they did not succeed. It was a cloudy night, but still the moon gave some light, and the horsemen, who proved to be Mr. Hale, (who had been unexpectedly called home,) his brother the Captain, and a servant, caught a glimpse of them. The gentlemen directly gave their horses to the servant, and jumping over the pales hastened towards the pond. The plunderers immediately ran off, and three of them were soon lost in the plantations. Wildgoose, however, in the hurry set his foot in a drain, threw himself down, and was taken.

When told his name and place of abode, Mr. Hale said, that "he remembered his father as an honest and industrious man: " indeed the sad accident by which he lost his life, had made his name

known throughout the neighbourhood. And then addressing himself to his prisoner, "Young man," said he, "I respected your father, and have heard that your mother bears an excellent character; I am therefore, heartily sorry to find that their son has taken to such bad practices. It is well for you that I did not come up a little later, after you had carried your scheme into execution. Had that been the case, you might have been transported." "Transported!" said Wildgoose in astonishment, "what, transported for taking a few fish!" "Yes, transported," replied the magistrate; "if a man steals fish from a pond in any inclosed ground, he is, upon conviction before one Justice, to be sentenced to pay five pounds: but if he enters into any park, or paddock, or garden adjoining to a house, and steals fish from any river, or pond in it, he is liable to be indicted at the Assizes, and transported for seven years[c]. The law often finds it necessary to protect, by a severe penalty, property that is much exposed; and when a man is daring enough to carry on his depredations in the very homestead of his neighbour, he requires a severe punishment. In the present case, though your intention is sufficiently clear, I have no wish, and do not feel bound, to prosecute you. Nor shall I (as I might do) sue you for the trespass. Go home to your mother, and never again allow yourself to be led by bad advisers into the like crime."

[c] See Note [C.]

Jack had told his mother that he was going to a friend at a distance, and should not return home that night. This made her sadly anxious; but she knew by experience that persuasion was lost upon him. When he returned home in the morning, she was confirmed in the suspicion that something was wrong. From his intimacy with Will Atkins she concluded he had been upon some poaching scheme; and determined, as she could do nothing herself, to try what effect Mr. Hooker could produce upon her son. It was not long before a good opportunity offered. Just as Jack left Mr. Hale's paddock, a heavy rain had come on, which soon soaked his clothes. Wet as he was, he got into a shed, partly for shelter, and partly to fill up the time, till his mother was up in the morning to let him in. The consequence was, that he caught a severe cold, attended with so much fever and head-ache, that he was unfit to go to work. Mr. Hooker called, and having kindly enquired after his health, began giving some hints on the subject of poaching. Jack sulkily answered, that "no one had a right to consider him as a poacher, until he was caught." Mr. Hooker, however, who had had some communication with Sir John's keeper, soon let him know that he had good ground for what he said; and endeavoured to make him sensible of the criminality and danger of his conduct. Jack would not acknowledge that poaching was wrong. Stealing he knew was disgraceful and sinful. To carry off a sheep, or to rob a henroost, deserved, he allowed, to be severely punished; "but," said he, "I cannot see the harm of *poaching*: animals that run wild by nature belong to nobody, and any body that can has a right to catch them. I don't know why it is more wrong to kill a partridge than it is to kill a crow or a sparrow; or why catching a hare is worse than knocking down a squirrel." "The laws of the land," said Mr. Hooker, "have made a difference between those animals, and it is the duty of every man to obey the laws of the country in which he lives." "Not," answered Jack, "if the laws are hard or unfair." "Our duty," replied Mr. Hooker, "is to obey the laws as we find them. If every one were at liberty to reject such laws as he disliked, we might almost as well have no laws at all. The thief would cast off the laws against stealing; the drunkard those against drunkenness; and of course the poacher would have no laws against poaching. The Scriptures teach us *to submit ourselves to every ordinance of man*; why? *for the Lord's sake*: – as a matter of religious duty. They bid us to be subject not only for wrath, for fear of punishment, but *for conscience sake*. They teach us *to obey magistrates*: to be dutiful *to the king as supreme, and to magistrates as to them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and the praise of them that do well*. Remember, therefore, that quiet obedience to the laws of the land is a Christian duty. We are to obey the laws, whether we approve of them or not: but perhaps, after all, the laws against poaching are not so unreasonable as you take them to be. Upon what do the hares, and pheasants, and partridges feed?" "Why, upon a number of things; chiefly upon the grass

and corn, and such like; and a deal of mischief they do." "Well then, being supported by the produce of the land, they ought in some way to belong to the land; but as from their wildness they move about from place to place, it is for the law to say in what manner they shall belong to it; and the law does this by making a certain property in land the principal qualification for killing game. Perhaps I may think that some alteration in the qualification might be an advantage; but I am not a lawgiver, Jack, any more than you; and as I said before, we are to obey the laws as we find them." "It's very well," said Jack, sulkily, "for a gentleman like you to talk about obedience to the laws, but I don't know what good the laws do to such a poor fellow as I am." Mr. Hooker did not immediately notice this, but, seeming to change the conversation, said, "By the bye, John, I was sorry to hear of your quarrel with Tom Nutman, the blacksmith at Ratton. I'm told that he threatens to break every bone in your skin. Are you not afraid of meeting him?" "Afraid," said Jack, "let him touch me if he dare." "Why, do you think that he is prevented by any sense of religion from putting his threat in execution?" "Religion! he has no more religion than a dog." "Oh! then you think that he is afraid of you, and that you are more than a match for him?" "Why no, I can't say that: – he's much the strongest man of the two, and is a noted prize fighter." "Then why should he not dare to touch you?" "Because he knows, that if he should strike me, I should get a warrant against him, and have him off to prison before he was a day older." "Oh! that is what you mean, is it? it seems then that the law is of some use to you, poor as you are. And as you say that he is not influenced by the fear of God, what is there that prevents his coming to-morrow, with half a dozen of the Ratton men, carrying off every thing in your mother's shop, and breaking your head if you said a word against it? – The laws of the land certainly, which he knows would severely punish his wrong doing." John was forced to acknowledge, that even the poor had an interest in the protection afforded by the law to persons and property.

"But," continued Mr. Hooker, "poaching is positively wrong, not only as it is a breach of the laws, but on many other accounts. It is plainly contrary to the great rule of doing as you would be done by. You would not like, if the law gave you a right to any particular thing, to have any man come and take that thing from you: and so, when the proprietor of an estate and manor, like Sir John, is at much expence and trouble in order to preserve the game, which the law gives him a right to preserve, it is clearly wrong, and in opposition to the great rule which I have mentioned, for any man to invade that right. Besides, poaching is apt to bring a man into bad company, which is always most dangerous. The habit of being out at nights makes him familiar with deeds which shun the light; and too often, if he is disappointed of his game, the poacher makes up for it by taking poultry, or any thing else he can lay his hands on. We hear too every day, how poaching leads on to deeds of violence, and even of bloodshed, in the conflicts which it occasions with the men, whose duty it is to protect the game. In short, John, poaching is wrong in itself; it leads a man into a lawless way of life, and frequently is the beginning of all kinds of wickedness."

Young Wildgoose felt that there was much truth in what Mr. Hooker said; and though the pride, or stubbornness of his character would not allow him to acknowledge it at the time, yet when he came to reflect on it after the clergyman was gone, he pretty much determined within himself that he would give up the sinful and dangerous practice into which he had been drawn. Perhaps some private reason came in aid of his good resolution. He stuck to his work; kept away from the Fighting Cocks; and avoided the company of Will Atkins and his old associates. His mother observed the alteration in his conduct with heartfelt pleasure. From the odd temper of her son, she thought it might be prudent not to say much about it: but she was particularly kind in her manner to him, and did all that she could to make his home comfortable. Young Wildgoose felt this as he ought, and for some time every thing went on well.

Unhappily one evening in November, as John was returning from his work, he accidentally fell in with his old companion Atkins: "Why, Jack," cried he, "what have you been doing with yourself? We never see thee among us now; and many a merry night have we had. What has made thee so shy of late?" Wildgoose told him that he was going to turn over a new leaf, and had given up poaching.

"Well now, I'm sorry for that; but still that's no reason why you should'nt now and then join a friend or two over a pot of beer; so come along with me to Tomkins's. He'll be quite glad to see thee again." John refused with some steadiness, but Atkins said so much, with a sort of good-humoured raillery, that at last he gave way. In one pot of ale he thought there could be no harm.

At the Fighting Cocks they found four or five of Will Atkins's particular friends sitting round the fire. They had not been drinking much, seemed sociable and friendly, and talked about any thing that came uppermost. Wildgoose soon went beyond the quantity, to which he had stinted himself; when all at once Atkins called out, "Come now, Jack, do tell us what could possess you to give up sporting. You used to take as much pleasure in it as any gentleman in the land." John was taken by surprise, and did not well know what to answer. At length he fairly acknowledged that he gave it up in consequence of what Mr. Hooker had said to him. "Well now, that is too bad," said Will, "I thought that you had been a lad of too much spirit to be talked over by a parson. I concluded that you had some real good reason, and never should have guessed that you had nothing more to say for yourself than that." John replied, that Mr. Hooker spoke very kindly to him; and that in what he said, he seemed to have both sense and Scripture on his side. "Scripture!" exclaimed Bob Fowler, "why sure enough Jack Wildgoose is turned methodist." They all laughed heartily at the joke, and went on for some time bantering Wildgoose upon his being so straight-laced. Jack never could stand being laughed at. He had not resolution enough to hold fast his integrity, when his integrity exposed him to ridicule. He did not remember the words of the prophet, *Fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be afraid of their revilings*: nor those of our Saviour, *Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words*– that is, ashamed of being religious, of being a Christian —*in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when he cometh in his glory with his holy angels*. In short, Atkins and his comrades plied Jack Wildgoose so successfully with ale and bantering, that he gave up his good resolutions, and agreed to accompany them on a scheme which they had already planned for making an attack upon Sir John's preserve. They sat drinking till past twelve o'clock at night, and then repaired by different roads to the scene of action.

It so happened, that the keepers had received some information, which had carried them to the opposite side of the manor. The gang, therefore, carried on their operations for some time without interruption; and when their firing had drawn the keepers towards them, one of the party, who had been posted on the look-out, contrived to give them a signal, so that they got away without difficulty. They returned to their rendezvous loaded with pheasants, for which Tomkins paid them a good price, with some gin into the bargain. They gave Wildgoose more than his fair share of the money by way of encouragement; and agreed to meet again on the following Thursday.

On that day they determined to try their luck in the wood which covers the north side of the hill, just at the outside of Sir John's park. The party consisted of Black Will, Bob Fowler, John Wildgoose, Tom Cade, and one more. Will and Bob were provided with guns; the rest had bludgeons, in order to assist them, in case of any interruption from the keepers. Atkins and Cade entered the wood from the park, and the three others a little lower down. Atkins had just fired at a pheasant, when one of the under keepers jumped up out of the ditch, and calling out, "Holloa! what are you at there?" ran to Atkins, and collared him. Tom, who was at a small distance behind a tree, immediately came to his friend's assistance, and a well aimed blow of his bludgeon laid the assailant at their feet. At this moment the head keeper and several of Sir John's men came up, and secured Tom. The other poachers were brought by the noise to the field of battle, and attempted to rescue their comrade; but as Fowler was aiming a blow at the man who had hold of him, one of Sir John's garden men struck him on the right arm, just above the elbow, with such tremendous force, that the bone was broken. The poachers, who before had begun to find that the keepers were too many for them, immediately ran, leaving Bob wounded, and Tom a prisoner. The former, in consequence of the hurt which he had received, was allowed to return to his family; but Tom was carried off to a magistrate, and then to gaol, in order to take his trial at the ensuing Quarter Sessions. The other three, when they found

themselves safe from pursuit, slackened their pace. Will first broke silence, by exclaiming, "A pretty business we have made of it to-night. Well, we can't always manage as we did last week; but I hate to go home empty-handed." They were now passing through the orchard at the back of Farmer Dobson's house, when Will spied some turkeys, which had imprudently chosen to roost in the trees, instead of going into the poultry house. The opportunity was tempting; and for want of other game, Will twitched two of them from their branch, and carried them off so quietly, that the farmer's dog did not utter a single bark. Wildgoose was a good deal shocked at this. In the pursuit of game, though illegal, he thought there was something spirited and manly; but revolted at the idea of *stealing*. What Mr. Hooker had said on the tendency of poaching to lead on to other crimes occurred to him. He ventured to remonstrate; but Will answered, "Why, what's the harm? The old fellow is rich enough, and can well spare a turkey or two. If I had left them, they would only have bought a little more finery for his daughters." John still persisted that stealing was dishonourable, but his comrade replied, "Come, come, let's have no more preaching; in our way of life a man must not mind trifles. To tell you the truth, I have done as much by a sheep before now; – only then, to be sure, I had a little bit of a grudge against the farmer, and I knew he could easily afford it." Wildgoose was more and more staggered. He saw how easily a man, who was in the habit of breaking the laws in one instance, could go on to break them in another, but gave up arguing the point with his companion.

Fowler contrived to get home with his broken arm before the morning. When the surgeon arrived, he found that the fracture was a bad one; and the worse from the severe bruise with which it was accompanied. On the Saturday morning, his wife, who had four small children, went to the overseer for relief. "And so you think," said he, "Nanny, that because your husband has thrown himself out of work, by his own misconduct, he is to be supported out of the pockets of the farmers? We have enough to do to pay rents and taxes, and provide for our own families, without having to provide for the families of poachers. If your husband had met with an accident in an honest way, I'm sure, I for one should have been for giving him all possible assistance; and no farmer in the parish would have said a word against it: but it is very hard that we should be expected to pay for his bad deeds." Nanny Fowler felt the truth of what he said, but replied, "that still they must not starve." "It is true," answered the overseer, "the law does say that nobody shall starve; but you must not expect much more from me than is just necessary to keep you from starving. I'm sorry, Nanny, for you and your children, but when the father of a family breaks the laws, he must expect his family to suffer for it as well as himself. It is in the nature of things that it should be so. You shall have from the parish just what is necessary; but even that you shall receive by way of loan[d], and if your husband recovers the use of his arm, we shall compel him to repay it in the summer. If his arm never gets well again, which I fear may possibly be the case, we can't expect to get the money back; but we shall not maintain him in idleness. We shall set him to do what he can; and if he earns but a little, and is kept but just from starving, he will have no one to blame but himself."

[d] See Note [D.]

The bad success of the last expedition, and the loss of strength which they had sustained, kept the gang of plunderers comparatively quiet. Jack Wildgoose, however, and Black Will, again took to their old practice of wiring hares[e]; and contrived to dispose of a considerable number. The keepers were aware of it, but somehow could never manage to come upon them exactly at the right time. One Sunday morning, when Jack had gone round to examine into the state of his snares, and had just taken up a hare with the wire round its neck, Stokes the under-keeper, who had been concealed on the other side of the hedge, suddenly started up, and caught him in the fact. An information against him was immediately laid by one of Stokes's fellow-servants; a summons was procured; and John Wildgoose appeared at the Justice meeting, which took place next day.

[e] See Note [E.]

The information having been read, and Wildgoose having pleaded not guilty, the keeper was sworn, and began to give his evidence. Being asked at what hour in the morning the transaction took place, he replied, "A little after seven: for I had heard the great clock at Sir John's strike a few minutes before." "That's false, however," said a voice from the crowd, which was assembled in the Justice room. "Come forward there," said one of the Justices; when who should make his appearance but Black Will. The magistrate told him not to interrupt the witness, but that if he had any thing to say, he should state it upon oath when the keeper's evidence had been gone through. This was soon done; and then Atkins being sworn, and desired to state what he knew of the business, replied, "I know but little about it; but this I *can* say, before seven on Sunday morning Jack Wildgoose and I started together to see a friend at Hollybourn, which your Worship may perhaps know is about six miles off. We went to church there, and did not get back till the afternoon. So how Jack can have been wiring hares after seven I don't very well know." The Justices looked surprised, as the under-keeper had the character of being an honest, truth-telling man. Wildgoose himself said nothing. Mr. Hale, who acted as chairman, was beginning to put some questions to Stokes, in the hope of finding something either to confirm or to weaken his testimony, when an elderly man in a smock frock came to the bar, and said, "I should be as glad as any one to have the young man got off, both for his own sake, and for the sake of his good mother; but I cannot stand by in silence, and hear a man take such an audacious false oath as that sworn by Will Atkins. Why you know, Will," continued he, "that you skulked by the Fighting Cocks soon after seven; I was afraid that you were about no good, and if the gentlemen won't believe me, I can name another who saw you as well as I." This was old Truman, who had got a lift in Tomkins's cart for the sake of hearing the proceedings, but without the most distant thought of taking any part in them himself. His high respect for the name of God, and his general love of truth, compelled him to speak against his own wishes.

The fact was this. Atkins, who had gone to meet Wildgoose on the Sunday morning, in order to receive from him the hares which he had snared, heard that he had been detected, and almost immediately determined to try the chance of setting up an *alibi*. For himself, as he had not the fear of God before his eyes, he cared not whether what he swore was false or true, so that it answered his purpose. He therefore had directed Wildgoose, though without telling him his intention, to keep close at home, and let no one see him; and had hastened himself to get out of the village, unobserved as he thought by any one.

When Truman spoke, Black Will turned pale with vexation and rage, and darted at the old man a look, which said that he longed to strike him to the earth. When Truman, however, had repeated his statement upon oath, Atkins endeavoured to get out of the scrape as well as he could, and stammered out something about mistaking the hour. Mr. Hale the chairman gave him a most serious reprimand. He told him, that "the deliberately calling upon the God of truth to bear witness to a falsehood, was daring the Almighty to his face. That, as the property, the good name, and even the lives of men depended in great measure upon preserving the proper respect for an oath, the man who wilfully took a false oath deserved to be banished out of all civilized society; he added, that he hoped Sir John would indict him for perjury." He then proceeded to convict Wildgoose. "The penalty," said he, "for using engines for the destruction of game, on other days, is, as you know well enough, five pounds. But as your offence was committed on the Lord's Day, the penalty is any sum that we think fit, provided it is not more than 20 [English Pound] nor less than 10 [English Pound]. In compassion to your mother we will fix the lower sum. This it is our duty to sentence you to pay. If you cannot pay it, and have not goods which we can distrain, you must go to prison." Wildgoose answered that as for the penalty, he neither could nor would pay it: that he had no goods, as he was only a sort of a lodger in his mother's house, and that he had as soon go to prison as not. He knew that there he should have plenty to eat and little to do. In this last supposition he was mistaken, as the magistrates had, though with some difficulty, contrived to find work enough to keep the prisoners continually employed. The parish constable, under whose care Wildgoose was, said, that of his own certain knowledge he was

able to confirm the truth of his statement as to his having no goods to distrain. The commitment therefore was made out, and Jack was sent off to the county gaol.

Lightly as he had talked of going to prison, yet he felt a good deal when actually on his way thither; and when he saw the high walls, the grated windows, the narrow cells, – still more when he heard the clank of the fetters of some of his fellow prisoners, who were confined for heinous offences, his soul sank within him. He was shocked too and mortified at being required to put on that token of disgrace, a prison dress. He did not, however, remain there long. His poor mother was thunderstruck at hearing that her son was really sent to prison, and lost no time in endeavouring to get money enough to pay the fine in order to procure his freedom. She had hardly any money in the house; but her neighbours were ready to lend her what they had by them; and four pounds, being the whole of her savings in service, were eagerly and freely given by Lucy Wilmot, a well-behaved young woman, to whom Jack Wildgoose had for some time been attached.

Mrs. Wildgoose could not bear to be in debt; and as she never was able to do much more than just maintain her family, she knew that she must deny herself and her children every little indulgence in order to repay her kind neighbours. But she thought that any thing was better than suffering her son to remain in prison, in the society, it might be, of depraved and abandoned characters.

The penalty having been paid, Jack was immediately set at liberty. He felt a little abashed at first coming home; but the kind manner of his mother, who, though her heart was full of grief, would not utter the least reproach, relieved him. Jack soon observed in a variety of little things a change in his mother's manner of living. She had been accustomed, for instance, to give her children a bit of meat baked with a pudding on Sundays. When, instead of this, nothing made its appearance but some potatoes and dripping, with bread and cheese, the girls looked disconcerted, and Sam cried out, "Why, mother, what's become of the meat and pudding? This is no better than a working-day's dinner." Mrs. Wildgoose told them, that she could not at present afford to give them a better, and they should be thankful for what they had. John knew well enough the meaning of this, and, to do him justice, felt a good deal. Often did he now wish that he had in his pocket again those many shillings and sixpences, which he had uselessly spent at the Fighting Cocks.

His mother, who had always been pleased with his attachment to Lucy Wilmot, thought it but fair to tell him one day how generously she had contributed to his enlargement. John was much overcome, and took the first opportunity of warmly thanking Lucy for her kindness to him. Lucy was vexed at his knowing it, and was a good deal confused; but there was something in her manner, which encouraged him to express his hopes of being some day united to her. Lucy was a frank, ingenuous, open-hearted girl, and did not pretend to deny the regard that she felt for him; "but, John," said she, "I can never consent to marry a poacher; I should not think it right to unite myself to a man who lives in the habit of breaking the laws. I could not bear to have for a husband, the companion of nightly plunderers, drunkards, and sabbath-breakers. Besides, I should never have a moment's peace. The thoughts of fines, and imprisonments, and fightings with game-keepers, and all sorts of terrible things, would never be out of my head. Instead of your coming home to me at night, I should expect to hear of your being taken up, or wounded, or being forced to fly the country. No, John; I don't pretend to deny the kindness I feel for you. We were play-fellows when children; were always good friends as we were growing up; and – perhaps – I might now use a stronger term of regard; but I never will – I never can – marry a poacher." Wildgoose promised again and again, that he would give it up. "So you said before, John. Nobody could promise fairer than you did; and for a little while I hoped you would keep your promise. But you know how little came of it after all." John promised that this time he would be more steady. Lucy replied, "As yet, John, we are both much too young to think of settling. If I know my own heart, I think that I shall never love any man but you: but I will never become your wife, until you have shewn, by the experience of a year or two, that you have firmness enough to keep to your present resolution."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.