JOHN F. WATSON

THE CONFESSIONS OF A POACHER

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Содержание

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Chapter I
The Embryo Poacher

I do not remember the time when I was not a poacher; and if I may say so, I believe our family has always had a genius for woodcraft.

I was bred on the outskirts of a sleepy town in a good game country, and my depredations were mostly when the Game Laws were less rigorously enforced than now. Our home was roughly adorned in fur and feather, and a number of gaunt lurchers always constituted part of the family. An almost passionate love of nature, summers of birds' nesting, and a life spent almost wholly out of doors constituted an admirable training for an embryo poacher. If it is true that poets are born, not made, it is equally so of poachers. The successful "moucher" must be an inborn naturalist—must have much in common with the creatures of the fields and woods around him.

There is a miniature bird and animal fauna which constitutes as important game to the young poacher as any he is likely to come across in after life. There are mice, shrews, voles, for all

of which he sets some primitive snare and captures. The silky-coated moles in their runs offer more serious work, and being most successfully practised at night, offers an additional charm. Then there are the red-furred squirrels which hide among the delicate leaves of the beeches and run up their grey boles—fairy things that offer an endless subject of delight to any young savage, and their capturing draws largely upon his inventive genius. A happy hunting ground is furnished by farmers who require a lad to keep the birds from their young wheat or corn, as when their services are required the country is all like a garden. At this time the birds seem creatures born of the sun, and not only are they seen in their brightest plumage, but when indulging in all their love frolics. By being employed by the farmers the erstwhile poacher is brought right into the heart of the land, and the knowledge of woodcraft and rural life he there acquires is never forgotten. As likely as not a ditch runs by the side of the wheat fields, and here the water-hen leads out her brood. To the same spot the birds come at noon to indulge their mid-day *siesta*, and in the deep hole at the end of the cut a shoal of silvery roach fall and rise towards the warm sunlight. Or a brook, which is a tiny trout stream, babbles on through the meadows and pastures, and has its attractions too. A stream is always the chief artery of the land, as in it are found the life-giving elements. All the birds, all the plants, flock to its banks, and its wooded sides are hushed by the subdued hum of insects. There are tall green brackens—brackens unfurling their fronds to the light, and full of the atoms

of beautiful summer. At the bend of the stream is a lime, and you may almost see its glutinous leaves unfolding to the light. Its winged flowers are infested with bees. It has a dead bough almost at the bottom of its bole, and upon it there sits a grey-brown bird. Ever and anon it darts for a moment, hovers over the stream, and then returns to its perch. A hundred times it flutters, secures its insect prey, and takes up its old position on the stump. Bronze fly, bluebottle, and droning bee are secured alike, for all serve as food to the loveable pied fly-catcher.

It is the time of the bloom of the first June rose; and here, by the margin of the wood, all the ground by fast falling blossom is littered. Every blade teems with life, and the air is instinct with the very breath of being. Birds' sounds are coming from over and under—from bough and brake, and a harmonious discord is flooded from the neighbouring copse. The oak above my head is a murmurous haunt of summer wings, and wood pigeons coo from the beeches. The air is still, and summer is on my cheek; arum, wood-sorrel, and celandine mingle at my feet. The starlings are half buried in the fresh green grass, their metallic plumage flashing in the sun. Cattle are lazily lying dotted over the meadows, and the stream is done in a setting of green and gold. Swallows, skimming the pools, dip in the cool water, and are gone—leaving a sweet commotion in ever widening circles long after they have flown. A mouse-like creeper alights at the foot of a thorn, and runs nimbly up the bark; midway it enters a hole in which is its nest. A garrulous blue-winged jay chatters

from the tall oak, and purple rooks are picking among the corn. Butterflies dally through the warm air, and insects swarm among the leaves and flowers of the hedge bottoms. A crake calls, now here, now far out yonder. Bluebells carpet the wood-margin, and the bog is bright with marsh plants.

This, then, is the workshop of the young poacher, and here he receives his first impressions. Is it strange that a mighty yearning springs up within him to know more of nature's secrets? He finds himself in a fairy place, and all unconsciously drinks in its sweets. See him now deeply buried in a golden flood of marsh marigolds! See how he stands spellbound before saxifrages which cling to a dripping rock. Water avens, wild parsley, and campions crowd around him, and flags of the yellow and purple iris tower over all. He watches the doings of the reed-sparrows deep down in the flags, and sees a water-ouzel as it rummages among the pebbles at the bottom of the brook. The larvæ of caddis flies, which cover the edge of the stream, are a curious mystery to him, and he sees the kingfisher dart away as a bit of green light. Small silvery trout, which rise in the pool, tempt him to try for them with a crooked pin, and even now with success. He hears the cuckoos crying and calling as they fly from tree to tree, and quite unexpectedly finds the nest of a yellow-hammer, between a willow and the bank, containing its curiously speckled eggs.

Still the life, and the "hush," and the breath go on. Everything breathes, and moves, and has its being; the things of the day are the essence thereof. On the margin of the wood are a few young

pines, their delicate plumes just touched with the loveliest green. An odour of resinous gum is wafted from them, and upon one of the slender sprays a pair of diminutive goldcrests have hung their procreant cradle. These things are enough to win any young Bohemian to their ways, and although as yet they only comprise "the country," soon their wondrous detail lures their lover on, and he seeks to satisfy the thirst within him by night as well as by day.

Endless acquaintances are to be made in the fields, and those of the most pleasurable description. Nests containing young squirrels can be found in the larch tree tops, and any domestic tabby will suckle these delightful playthings. Young cushats and cushats' eggs can be obtained from their wicker-like nests, and sold in the villages. A prickly pet may be captured in a hedgehog trotting off through the long grass, and colonies of young wild rabbits may be dug from the mounds and braes. The skin of every velvety mole is one patch nearer the accomplishment of a warm, furry vest for winter, and this, if the pests of which it is comprised are the owner's taking, is worn with pardonable pride. A moleskin vest constitutes a graduation in woodcraft so to speak. Sometimes a brace of leverets are found in a tussocky grass clump, but these are more often allowed to remain than taken. And there are almost innumerable captures to be made among the feathered as well as furred things of the fields and woods. Chaffinches are taken in nooses among the corn, as are larks and buntings. Crisp cresses from the springs constitute an important source of income, and the embrowned nuts of autumn

a harvest in themselves. It is during his early days of working upon the land that the erstwhile poacher learns of the rain-bringing tides; of the time of migration of birds; of the evening gamboling of hares; of the coming together of the partridge to roost; of the spawning of salmon and trout; and a hundred other scraps of knowledge which will serve him in good stead in his subsequent protest against the Game Laws.

Almost every young rustic who develops into a poacher has some such outdoor education as that sketched above. He has about him much ready animal ingenuity, and is capable of almost infinite resource. His snares and lines are constructed with his pocket knife, out of material he finds ready to hand in the woods. He early learns to imitate the call of the game birds, so accurately as to deceive even the birds themselves; and his weather-stained clothes seem to take on themselves the duns and browns and olives of the woods. A child brought up in the lap of Nature is invariably deeply marked with her impress, and we shall see to what end she has taught him.

Chapter II
Under the Night

> Now came still evening on, and twilight gray
> Had in her sober liv'ry all things clad.

Then the embryo poacher has once tasted the forbidden fruits of the land—and it matters not if his game be but field-mice and squirrels—there is only one thing wanting to win him completely to Nature's ways. This is that he shall see her sights and hear her sounds under the night. There is a charm about the night side of nature that the town dweller can never know. I have been once in London, and well remember what, as a country lad, impressed me most. It was the fact that I had, during the small hours of the morning, stood alone on London Bridge. The great artery of life was still; the pulse of the city had ceased to beat. Not a moving object was visible. Although bred among the lonely hills, I felt for the first time that this was to be alone; that this was solitude. I felt such a sense as Macaulay's New Zealander may experience when he sits upon the ruins of the same stupendous structure; and it was then for the first time I knew whence the inspiration, and felt the full force and realism of a line I had heard, "O God! the very houses seemed to sleep." I could detect no definite sound, only that vague and distant hum that for ever haunts and

hangs over a great city. Then my thoughts flew homeward (to the fells and upland fields, to the cold mists by the river, to the deep and sombre woods). I had never observed such a time of quiet there; no absolute and general period of repose. There was always something abroad, some creature of the fields or woods, which by its voice or movements was betrayed. Just as in an old rambling house there are always strange noises that cannot be accounted for, so in the night-paths of nature there are innumerable sounds which can never be localised. To those, however, who pursue night avocations in the country, there are always calls and cries which bespeak life as animate under the night as that of the day. This is attributable to various animals and birds, to beetles, to night-flying insects, even to fish; and part of the education of the young poacher is to track these sounds to their source.

I have said that our family was a family of poachers. The old instinct was in us all, though I believe that the same wild spirit which drove us to the moor and covert at night was only the same as was strongly implanted in the breast of Lord –, our neighbour, who was a legitimate sportsman and a Justice of the Peace. If we were not allowed to see much real poaching when we were young we saw a good deal of the preparations for it. As the leaves began to turn in autumn there was great activity in our old home among nets and snares. When wind and feather were favourable, late afternoon brought home my father, and his wires and nets were already spread on the clean sanded floor. There was a peg to

sharpen, or a broken mesh to mend. Every now and then he would look out on the darkening night, always directing his glance upward. The two dogs would whine impatiently to be gone, and in an hour, with bulky pockets, he would start, striking right across the land and away from the high road. The dogs would prick out their ears on the track, but stuck doggedly to his heels; and then, as we watched, the darkness would blot him out of the landscape, and we turned with our mother to the fireside. In summer we saw little but the "breaking" of the lurchers. These dogs take long to train, but, when perfected, are invaluable. All the best lurchers are the produce of a cross between the sheep-dog and greyhound, a combination which secures the speed and silence of the one, and the "nose" of the other. From the batches of puppies we always saved such as were rough-coated, as these were better able to stand the exposure of long, cold nights. In colour the best are fawn or brown—some shade which assimilates well to the duns and browns and yellows of the fields and woods; but our extended knowledge of the dogs came in after years.

The oak gun-rack in our old home contained a motley collection of fowling pieces, mostly with the barrels filed down. This was that the pieces might be more conveniently stowed away in the pocket until it was policy to have them out. The guns showed every graduation in age, size, and make, and among them was an old flint-lock which had been in the family for generations. This heirloom was often surreptitiously stolen away, and then we were able to bring down larger game. Wood pigeons

were waited for in the larches, and shot as they came to roost. The crakes were called by the aid of a small "crank," and shot as they emerged from the lush summer grass. Large numbers of green plover were bagged from time to time, and often in winter we had a chance at their grey cousins, the whistling species. Both these fed in the water-meadows through winter, and the former were always abundant. In spring, "trips" of rare dotterel often led us about the higher hills for days, and sometimes we had to stay all night on the mountain. Then we were up with the first gray light in the morning, and generally managed to bring down a few birds. The feathers of these are extremely valuable for fishing, and my father invariably supplied them to the county justices who lived near us. He trained a dog to hunt dotterel, and so find their nests, and in this was most successful—more so than an eminent naturalist who spent five consecutive summers about the summits of our highest mountains, though without ever coming across a nest or seeing the birds. Sometimes we bagged a gaunt heron as it flapped heavily from a ditch—a greater fish poacher than any in the country side. One of our great resorts on winter evenings was to an island which bordered a disused mill-dam. This was thickly covered with aquatic vegetation, and to it came teal, mallard, and poachard. All through the summer we had worked assiduously at a small "dug-out," and in this we waited, snugly stowed away behind a willow root. When the ducks appeared on the sky-line the old flint-lock was out, a sharp report tore the darkness, and a brace of teal or mallard floated down stream, and on to the

mill island. In this way half a dozen ducks would be bagged, and, dead or dying, they were left where they fell, and retrieved next morning. Sometimes big game was obtained in the shape of a brace of geese, which proved themselves the least wary of a flock; but these only came in the severest weather.

Cutting the coppice, assisting the charcoal burners, or helping the old woodman—all gave facilities for observing the habits of game, and none of these opportunities were missed. In this way we were brought right into the heart of the land, and our evil genius was hardly suspected. An early incident in the woods is worth recording. I have already said that we took snipe and woodcock by means of "gins" and "springes," and one morning on going to examine a snare, we discovered a large buzzard near one which was "struck." The bird endeavoured to escape, but, being evidently held fast, could not. A woodcock had been taken in one of our snares, which, while fluttering, had been seen and attacked by the buzzard. Not content, however, with the body of the woodcock, it had swallowed a leg also, around which the nooze was drawn, and the limb was so securely lodged in its stomach that no force which the bird could exert could withdraw it. The gamekeepers would employ us to take hedgehogs, which we did in steel traps baited with eggs. These prickly little animals were justly blamed for robbing pheasants' nests, and many a one paid the penalty for so doing. We received so much per head for the capture of these, as also for moles which tunnelled the banks of the water meadows. Being injurious to the stream sides and

the young larches, the farmers were anxious to rid these; and one summer we received a commission to exercise our knowledge of field-craft against them. But in the early days our greatest successes were among the sea ducks and wildfowl which haunted the marram-covered flats and ooze banks of an inland bay a few miles from our home. Mention of our capturing the sea birds brings to mind some very early rabbit poaching. At dusk the rabbits used to come down from the woods, and on to the sandy saline tracts to nibble the short sea grass. As twilight came we used to lie quiet among the rocks and boulders, and, armed with the old flint-lock, knock over the rabbits as soon as they had settled to feed. But this was only tasting the delights of that first experience in "fur" which was to become so widely developed in future years. Working a duck decoy—when we knew where we had the decoyman—was another profitable night adventure, which sometimes produced dozens of delicate teal, mallard and widgeon. Another successful method of taking seafowl was by the "fly" or "ring" net. When there was but little or no moon these were set across the banks last covered by the tide. The nets were made of fine thread, and hung on poles from ten to twenty yards apart. Care had to be taken to do this loosely, so as to give the nets plenty of "bag." Sometimes we had these nets hung for half a mile along the mud flats, and curfew, whimbrel, geese, ducks, and various shore-haunting birds were taken in them. Sometimes a bunch of teal, flying down wind, would break right through the net and escape. This, however, was not a frequent occurrence.

There is one kind of poaching, which, as a lad, I was forbidden, and I have never indulged in it from that day to this. This was egg poaching. In our own district it was carried on to a large extent, though I never heard of it until the artificial rearing of game came in. The squire's keeper will give sixpence each for pheasants' eggs, and fourpence for those of partridges. I know for certain that he often buys eggs (unknowingly, of course) from his master's preserves as well as those of his neighbours. In the hedge bottom, along the covert side, or among broom and gorse, the farm labourer notices a pair of partridges roaming morning after morning. Soon he finds their oak-leaf nest and olive eggs. These the keeper readily buys, winking at what he knows to be dishonest. Ploughboys and farm labourers have peculiarly favourable opportunities for egg poaching. As to pheasants' eggs, if the keeper be an honest man and refuses to buy, there are always large town dealers who will. Once in the coverts pheasants' eggs are easily found. The birds get up heavily from their nests, and go away with a loud whirring of wings. In this species of poaching women and children are largely employed, and at the time the former are ostensibly gathering sticks, the latter wild flowers. I have known the owner of the "smithy," who was the receiver in our village, send to London in the course of a week a thousand eggs, every one of them gathered off the neighbouring estates.

When I say that I never indulged in egg poaching I do not set up for being any better than my neighbours. I had been forbidden

to do it as a lad because my father give it the ugly name of thieving, and it had never tempted me aside. It was tame work at best, and there was none of the exhilarating fascination about it that I found in going after the game birds themselves.

Chapter III
Graduating in Woodcraft

We hear the cry
Of their voices high,
Falling dreamily through the sky;
But their forms we cannot see.

Just as the sportsman loves "rough shooting," so the poacher invariably chooses wild ground for his depredations. There is hardly a sea-parish in the country which has not its shore shooter, its poacher, and its fowler. Fortunately for my graduation in woodcraft I fell in with one of the latter at the very time I most needed his instructions. As the "Snig," as I was generally called, was so passionately fond of "live" things, old "Kittiwake" was quite prepared to be companionable. Although nearly three score years and ten divided our lives, there was something in common between us. Love of being abroad beneath the moon and stars; of wild wintry skies; of the weird cries that came from out the darkness—love of everything indeed that pertained to the night side of nature. What terrible tales of the sands and marshes the old man would tell as we sat in his turf-covered cottage, listening to the lashing storm and driving water without. Occasionally we heard sounds of the Demon Huntsman and his Wish-hounds as

they crossed the wintry skies. If Kittiwake knew, he would never admit that these were the wild swans coming from the north, which chose the darkest nights for their migration. When my old tutor saw that I was already skilled in the use of "gins" and "springes," and sometimes brought in a snipe or woodcock, his old eyes glistened as he looked upon the marsh-birds. It was on one such occasion, pleased at my success, that he offered what he had never offered to mortal—to teach me the whole art of fowling. I remember the old man as he lay on his heather bench when he made this magnanimous offer. In appearance he was a splendid type of a northern yeoman, his face fringed with silvery hair, and cut in the finest features. One eye was bright and clear even at his great age, though the other was rheumy, and almost blotted out. He rarely undressed at nights, his outward garb seemed more a production of nature than of art, and was changed, when, like the outer cuticle of the marsh vipers, it sloughed off. It was only in winter that the old man lived his lonely life on the mosses and marshes, for during the summer he turned from fowler to fisher, or assisted in the game preserves. The haunts and habits of the marsh and shore birds he knew by heart, and his great success in taking them lay in the fact that he was a close and accurate observer. He would watch the fowl, then set his nets and noozes by the light of his acquired knowledge. These things he had always known, but it was in summer, when he was assisting at pheasant rearing, that he got to know all about game in fur and feather. He noted that the

handsome cock pheasants always crowed before they flew up to roost; that in the evening the partridges called as they came together in the grass lands; and he watched the ways of the hares as they skipped in the moonlight. These things we were wont to discuss when wild weather prevented our leaving the hut; and all our plans were tested by experiment before they were put into practice. It was upon these occasions, too, that the garrulous old man would tell of his early life. That was the time for fowl; but now the plough had invaded the sea-birds' haunt. He would tell of immense flocks of widgeon, of banks of brent geese, and clouds of dunlin. Bitterns used to boom and breed in the bog, and once, though only once, a great bustard was shot. In his young days Kittiwake had worked a decoy, as had his father and grandfather before him; and when any stray fowler or shore-shooter told of the effect of a single shot of their big punt-guns, he would cap their stories by going back to the days of decoying. Although decoying had almost gone out, this was the only subject that the old man was reticent upon, and he surrounded the craft with all the mystery he was able to conjure up. The site of his once famous decoy was now drained, and in summer ruddy corn waved above it. Besides myself, Kittiwake's sole companion on the mosses was an old shaggy galloway, and it was almost as eccentric and knowing as its master. So great was the number of gulls and terns that bred on the mosses, that for two months during the breeding season the old horse was fed upon their eggs. Morning and evening a basketful was collected, and so long as

these lasted Dobbin's coat continued sleek and soft.

In August and September we would capture immense numbers of "flappers"—plump wild ducks—but, as yet, unable to fly. These were either caught in the pools, or chased into nets which we set to intercept them. As I now took more than my share of the work, and made all the gins, springes, and noozes which we used, a rough kind of partnership sprung up between us. The young ducks brought us good prices, and there was another source of income which paid well, but was not of long duration. There is a short period in each year when even the matured wild ducks are quite unable to fly. The male of the common wild duck is called the mallard, and soon after his brown duck begins to sit the drake moults the whole of its flight feathers. So sudden and simultaneous is this process that for six weeks in summer the usually handsome drake is quite incapable of flight, and it is probably at this period of its ground existence that the assumption of the duck's plumage is such an aid to protection. Quite the handsomest of the wildfowl on the marsh were a colony of sheldrakes which occupied a number of disused rabbit-burrows on a raised plateau overlooking the bay. The ducks were bright chestnut, white, and purple, and in May laid from nine to a dozen creamy eggs. As these birds brought high prices for stocking ornamental waters, we used to collect the eggs and hatch them out under hens in the turf cottage. This was a quite successful experiment up to a certain point; but the young fowl, immediately they were hatched, seemed to be able to smell

the salt water, and would cover miles to gain the creek. With all our combined watchfulness the downy ducklings sometimes succeeded in reaching their loved briny element, and once in the sea were never seen again. The pretty sea swallows used to breed on the marsh, and the curious ruffs and reeves. These indulged in the strangest flights at breeding time, and it was then that we used to capture the greatest numbers. We took them alive in nets, and then fattened them on soaked wheat. The birds were sent all the way to London, and brought good prices. By being kept closely confined and frequently fed, in a fortnight they became so plump as to resemble balls of fat, and then brought as much as a florin a piece. If care were not taken to kill the birds just when they attained to their greatest degree of fatness they fell rapidly in condition, and were nearly worthless. To kill them we were wont to pinch off the head, and when all the blood had exuded the flesh remained white and delicate. Greater delicacies even than ruffs and reeves were godwits, which were fatted in like manner for the table. Experiments in fattening were upon one occasion successfully tried with a brood of greylag geese which we discovered on the marshes. As this is the species from which the domestic stock is descended, we found little difficulty in herding, though we were always careful to house them at night, and pinioned them as the time of the autumnal migration came round. We well knew that the skeins of wild geese which at this time nightly cross the sky, calling as they fly, would soon have robbed us of our little flock.

In winter, snipe were always numerous on the mosses, and were among the first birds to be affected by severe weather. If on elevated ground when the frost set in, they immediately betake themselves to the lowlands, and at these times we used to take them in pantles made of twisted horsehair. In preparing these we trampled a strip of oozy ground until, in the darkness, it had the appearance of a narrow plash of water. The snipe were taken as they came to feed on ground presumably containing food of which they were fond. As well as woodcock and snipe, we took larks by thousands. The pantles for these we set somewhat differently than those intended for the minor game birds. A main line, sometimes as much as a hundred yards in length, was set along the marsh; and to this at short intervals were attached a great number of loops of horsehair in which the birds were strangled. During the migratory season, or in winter when larks are flocked, sometimes a hundred bunches of a dozen each would be taken in a single day.

During the rigour of winter great flocks of migratory ducks and geese came to the bay, and prominent among them were immense flocks of scoters. Often from behind an ooze bank did we watch parties of these playing and chasing each other over the crests of the waves, seeming indifferent to the roughest seas. The coming of the scoter brought flush times, and in hard weather our takes were tremendous. Another of the wild ducks which visited us was the pochard or dunbird. We mostly called it "poker" and "redhead," owing to the bright chestnut of its neck and head. It

is somewhat heavily made, swims low in the water, and from its legs being placed far behind for diving it is very awkward on land. In winter the pochard was abundant on the coast, but as it was one of the shyest of fowl it was always difficult to approach. If alarmed it paddles rapidly away, turning its head, and always keeping an eye to the rear. On account of its wariness it is oftener netted than shot. The shore-shooters hardly ever get a chance at it. We used to take it in the creeks on the marsh, and, as the matter is difficult to explain, I will let the following quotation tell how it was done:

"The water was surrounded with huge nets, fastened with poles laid flat on the ground when ready for action, each net being, perhaps, sixty feet long and twenty feet deep. When all was ready the pochards were frightened off the water. Like all diving ducks they were obliged to fly low for some distance, and also to head the wind before rising. Just as the mass of birds reached the side of the pool, one of the immense nets, previously regulated by weights and springs, rose upright as it was freed from its fastenings by the fowler from a distance with a long rope. If this were done at the right moment the ducks were met full in the face by a wall of net, and thrown helpless into a deep ditch dug at its foot for their reception."

In addition to our nets and snares we had a primitive fowling-piece, though we only used it when other methods failed. It was an ancient flint-lock, with tremendously long barrels. Sometimes it went off; oftener it did not. I well remember with

what desperation I, upon one occasion, clung to this murderous weapon whilst it meditated, so to speak. It is true that it brought down quite a wisp of dunlins, but then there was almost a cloud of them to fire at. These and golden plover were mainly the game for the flint-lock, and with them we were peculiarly successful. If we had not been out all night we were invariably abroad at dawn, when golden plover fly and feed in close bodies. Upon these occasions sometimes a dozen birds were bagged at a shot, though, after all, the chief product of our days were obtained in the cymbal nets. We invariably used a decoy, and when the wild birds were brought down, and came within the workings of the net, it was rapidly pulled over and the game secured. For the most part, however, only the smaller birds were taken in this way. Coots came round in their season, and although they yielded a good harvest, netting them was not very profitable, for as their flesh was dark and fishy only the villagers and fisher-folk would buy them.

A curious little bird, the grebe or dabchick, used to haunt the pools and ditches of the marsh, and we not unfrequently caught them in the nets whilst drawing for salmon which ran up the creek to spawn. They had curious feet, lobed like chestnut leaves, and hardly any wing. This last was more like a flipper, and upon one occasion, when no less than three had caught in the meshes, a dispute arose between us as to whether they were able to fly. Kittiwake and I argued that whilst they were resident and bred in the marshes, yet their numbers were greatly augmented in

autumn by other birds which came to spend the winter. Whilst I contended that they flew, Kittiwake said that their tiny wings could never support them, and certainly neither of us had ever seen them on their journeyings. Two of the birds we took a mile from the water, and then threw them into the air, when they darted off straight and swift for the mosses which lay stretched at our feet a mile below.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.