

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

THE PERSECUTION OF
BOB PRETTY

William Wymark Jacobs

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W. W. Jacobs

The Persecution of Bob Pretty / Odd Craft, Part 9

THE PERSECUTION OF BOB PRETTY

The old man sat on his accustomed bench outside the Cauliflower. A generous measure of beer stood in a blue and white jug by his elbow, and little wisps of smoke curled slowly upward from the bowl of his churchwarden pipe. The knapsacks of two young men lay where they were flung on the table, and the owners, taking a noon-tide rest, turned a polite, if bored, ear to the reminiscences of grateful old age.

Poaching, said the old man, who had tried topics ranging from early turnips to horseshoeing—poaching ain't wot it used to be in these 'ere parts. Nothing is like it used to be, poaching nor anything else; but that there man you might ha' noticed as went out about ten minutes ago and called me "Old Truthfulness" as 'e passed is the worst one I know. Bob Pretty 'is name is, and of all the sly, artful, deceiving men that ever lived in Claybury 'e is the worst—never did a honest day's work in 'is life and never wanted the price of a glass of ale.

Bob Pretty's worst time was just after old Squire Brown died. The old squire couldn't afford to preserve much, but by-and-by a gentleman with plenty o' money, from London, named Rockett, took 'is place and things began to look up. Pheasants was 'is favourites, and 'e spent no end o' money rearing of 'em, but anything that could be shot at suited 'im, too.

He started by sneering at the little game that Squire Brown 'ad left, but all 'e could do didn't seem to make much difference; things disappeared in a most eggstrordinary way, and the keepers went pretty near crazy, while the things the squire said about Claybury and Claybury men was disgraceful.

Everybody knew as it was Bob Pretty and one or two of 'is mates from other places, but they couldn't prove it. They couldn't catch 'im nohow, and at last the squire 'ad two keepers set off to watch 'im by night and by day.

Bob Pretty wouldn't believe it; he said 'e couldn't. And even when it was pointed out to 'im that Keeper Lewis was follering of 'im he said that it just 'appened he was going the same way, that was all. And sometimes 'e'd get up in the middle of the night and go for a fifteen- mile walk 'cos 'e'd got the toothache, and Mr. Lewis, who 'adn't got it, had to tag along arter 'im till he was fit to drop. O' course, it was one keeper the less to look arter the game, and by-and-by the squire see that and took 'im off.

All the same they kept a pretty close watch on Bob, and at last one arternoon they sprang out on 'im as he was walking past Gray's farm, and asked him wot it was he 'ad in his pockets.

"That's my bisness, Mr. Lewis," ses Bob Pretty.

Mr. Smith, the other keeper, passed 'is hands over Bob's coat and felt something soft and bulgy.

"You take your 'ands off of me," ses Bob; "you don't know 'ow partikler I am."

He jerked 'imself away, but they caught 'old of 'im agin, and Mr. Lewis put 'is hand in his inside pocket and pulled out two brace o' partridges.

"You'll come along of us," he ses, catching 'im by the arm.

"We've been looking for you a long time," ses Keeper Smith, "and it's a pleasure for us to 'ave your company."

Bob Pretty said 'e wouldn't go, but they forced 'im along and took 'im all the way to Cudford, four miles off, so that Policeman White could lock 'im up for the night. Mr. White was a'most as pleased as the keepers, and 'e warned Bob solemn not to speak becos all 'e said would be used agin 'im.

"Never mind about that," ses Bob Pretty. "I've got a clear conscience, and talking can't hurt me. I'm very glad to see you, Mr. White; if these two clever, experienced keepers hadn't brought me I should 'ave looked you up myself. They've been and stole my partridges."

Them as was standing round laughed, and even Policeman White couldn't 'elp giving a little smile.

"There's nothing to laugh at," ses Bob, 'olding his 'ead up. "It's a fine thing when a working man—a 'ardworking man—can't take home a little game for 'is family without being stopped and robbed."

"I s'pose they flew into your pocket?" ses Police-man White.

"No, they didn't," ses Bob. "I'm not going to tell any lies about it; I put 'em there. The partridges in my inside coat-pocket and the bill in my waistcoat-pocket."

"The bill?" ses Keeper Lewis, staring at 'im.

"Yes, the bill," ses Bob Pretty, staring back at 'im; "the bill from Mr. Keen, the poulterer, at Wick-ham."

He fetched it out of 'is pocket and showed it to Mr. White, and the keepers was like madmen a'most 'cos it was plain to see that Bob Pretty 'ad been and bought them partridges just for to play a game on 'em.

"I was curious to know wot they tasted like," he ses to the policeman. "Worst of it is, I don't s'pose my pore wife'll know 'ow to cook 'em."

"You get off 'ome," ses Policeman White, staring at 'im.

"But ain't I goin' to be locked up?" ses Bob. "'Ave I been brought all this way just to 'ave a little chat with a policeman I don't like."

"You go 'ome," ses Policeman White, handing the partridges back to 'im.

"All right," ses Bob, "and I may 'ave to call you to witness that these 'ere two men laid hold o' me and tried to steal my partridges. I shall go up and see my loryer about it."

He walked off 'ome with his 'ead up as high as 'e could hold it, and the airs 'e used to give 'imself arter this was terrible for to behold. He got 'is eldest boy to write a long letter to the squire about it, saying that 'e'd overlook it this time, but 'e couldn't promise for the future. Wot with Bob Pretty on one side and Squire Rockett on the other, them two keepers' lives was 'ardly worth living.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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