

THE POACHING CASE

A BIT OF WILTSHIRE HUMOUR

Some years ago, Ned Strouter, the poacher, was summonsed before the County Bench of Magistrates, charged with shooting a pheasant, and the only evidence against him was that of the Village Policeman, who happened to be down at the “Pig and Whistle,” and saw him offering the bird for sale to Bartholomew Barmy, the landlord : also, his over-hearing Sam Snatchem tell Jim Jinks, in the tap room, that he saw Strouter shoot the pheasant, as he was getting up that same morning.

Away went the policeman up to the Squire, with the information ; and the Squire, who had missed a lot of game, and knowing what a notorious poacher Strouter was reputed to be, determined to prosecute ; so a summons was taken out for Ned Strouter, and Sam Snatchem, Jim Jinks, and Bartholomew Barmey, the landlord, were also summoned as witnesses.

When the case was called on, and after the policeman had given his evidence, Squire's lawyer, Mr Solomon Squeezem, a little dapster sort of a man with eyes, visage, and voice, sharp as a fox, jumped up and calls for Samuel Snatchem, the first witness. Sam, a fine burly specimen of an agricultural labourer, comes up, and gets into the witness box.

“What are you?” says the little lawyer ; “A man, ta be zure,” zays Zam, with all tha feigned simplicity

imaginable!

“I didn't suppose, sir, for one moment, that you were a woman in disguise,” says the lawyer. “What is your occupation or trade, sir?” “No trade at ael,” zays Zam, “unless ya da caal hedgen an ditchen a trade.” “Then I take it you're a general farm hand.” “I spoose so,” zays Zam.

“I presume you've a pretty good memory,” says the lawyer. “Tarblish,” zays Zam, “when anybidly da owe I anything ; bit when I be owin thay, tis ginerally tother way about.”

“I take it, sir, your memory is quite good enough to remember Thursday morning, the twentieth of November last.” “O eece, I rekermembers thic ar marnin,” zays Zam.

“Then kindly inform the Bench what you saw, as you were getting up that morning.” “What I zeed,” zays Zam. “Yes sir, what you saw looking out of your bedroom window.” “Why, I zeed it wur a vine marnin.” “Look here, sir,” says the lawyer, “I didn't ask you to favour the Court with any observation about the weather, but to describe what you saw.”

“Why, vust of ael,” zays Zam, “me eyes lighted on Varmer Grigg's leetle pasture, jist in vrunt a ower cottage ; nex ta he, his whate vield ; an nex ta tha whate vield, Squire's Geam copse, rachin away right up auver tha hill.” “You have a pretty good view of the Game Copse from your cottage window, havn't you?” “O eece,” zays Zam. “Did you see anyone about?” “O eece, Varmer Griggs cows wur about, an ther wur a lot

a rooks, an starlins, waakin about amang em too.”

“Did you see any human being, sir?” “Eece, ther wur Joe Cobley, tha dairy chap, milken one a tha cows ; an woold Zam Zannet, tha drowner, clanen out tha leetle ditch, as da peart tha whate vield vrim tha Geam Copse.”

“Look here, my friend, I'll come to the point at once ; Didn't you see the prisoner Strouter there?”

“Dally zur, I wunt swear's I did ; ya zee me eyezite yeant very good tha baste a times, an bein yarly in tha marnin, avore I'd rinsed em out, I raaly wunt swear as I zeed un.” “Did you hear the report of firearms?” “O eece, I yeard a gun goo off.” “What did you see then?” “I zeed tha smoke then.” “Look here, sir,” zays the lawyer rather severly, “ you know very well Dairymen don't carry guns to milk cows with ; you also know that Drowners don't carry guns to clean out ditches with ; I ask you, therefore, to what conclusion did you come, as to who fired that gun?” “Why, zur, ta tell ee tha truth, I thought as ow mist be leetle Tommy Tatters, Varmer Griggs bird starver, virin he's musket ta keep tha rooks an starlins off tha young whate, as wur jist beginnen ta spring up.”

“After hearing the report of the gun, and seeing the smoke, did you observe anything fall?” “Eece, I did.” “What was that?” zays the lawyer, brightening up. “Why, a sharp storm a rain begun ta vall then, zoo I shut up tha winder, an com down stayers ; that's all I da knaa, zoo teant no use var ee ta ax I nothin at all no mwore about it.” “We will soon see about that my friend,” zays the little lawyer ; you just stand on one

side.” “Call James Jinks.” Jim, a little sharp gingery fellow, with a spotted face, and eyes like a ferritt, came up, and got into the witness box. “What are you?” says the lawyer. “Vorty haight, tenth a las October ; Wayhill vair day, ya knaa zur.” “I didn't ask for your age any more than I did for the size of your hat, or boots. Tell me your occupation, sir.” “Rat and Waant ketcher,” zays Jim. “Yes, and game catcher too, I'll be bound, when you can get the chance, Aye my friend.” “Nar bit tickler zur, when as yer da zay, I can get tha chaance ; which if twerden var thic ar Bobby there, prowlin about tha parish at nites, when a ought ta be in bade, zeams ael honest voke, tood be a leetle offener zur.”

“A candid confession, truly,” says the lawyer. “Now sir, follow me!” “Ael depends on wur ya'm gwain ta teak me to,” zaays Jim, preparin to leave tha box. “Stop where you are, sir! stop where you are, but follow my questions.” “You know the last witness, Snatchem?” “Well, I've a zeed un avore.” “A fast friend of yours, is he not?” “Well zur, a do get about a bit vaster, zunce I ad tha rehumatiz za bad in me liff laig las winter.” “Do you recollect being with him in the tap room at tha “Pig and Whistle,” on Thursday evening last, November the twentieth?”

“Dally zur, I caan't swear ta that, ya zee, he an I be down ther mwoast nites on ticklar business, that one nite ta I is jist like anodder ; I never cood mind dates, never, ony me birthday one.”

“Do you, then, on or about that time, recollect his telling you that he saw Strouter, the prisoner, shoot tha pheasant he was offering the landlord for sale?”

“Dally, no zur ; ya zee, as I zed avore, I've got a

terrible bad rekermembrance. I raaly cooden tell ee what happened eeceterdy, tha day avore, nar ta marrer neither ; I raaly wunt swear ta that zur.”

“You seem to have a very convenient memory, and I've no doubt reckon yourself to be a very knowing and cute sort of an individual,” says the lawyer. “Eece zur, thank ee zur ; that's what thay da ael zay zur ; steeds a bein a rat ketcher, ower measter zays I ought ta bin a lawyer.” “Sit down, sir,” says the lawyer, casting a withering look at Jim. “Call Bartholomew Barmy!” Bartley, a little short stumpy fellow, of about sixteen stone, came up, and squeezed himself into the witness box. The lawyer, after looking up and down, says “What are you, sir?” Bartley, putting his hand up to his ear, and looking across to the Bench, says, “What do tha gennelmin zay, zur? I'm ard a yearin.” “What are you?” roared out the little lawyer. “Me waight ar me age!” says Bartley. “Your occupation, sir, your occupation.” “Oh, I be landlard, I be.” “Oh, you're the landlord of the 'Pig and Whistle,' are you?” “Eece zur, that I be.” “You know the prisoner, Strouter?” “O eece zur, I da knaa un.” “A pretty good customer of yours, no doubt?” “Tarblish, zur, tarblish.” “Do you recollect his coming to your house, on the evening of November the twentieth last, and offering a pheasant for sale?” “Oh eece zur, that I do.” “And did you buy it?” “Eece zur, that I did.” “Was it a shot bird?” “O eece zur, thic thar bird wur a shot bird right anuff, cos Hanner, that's me wife, ya knaa zur, zed as how tha gennelman as shot thic ar pheasant, knaa'd wur ta het un, zo's not ta spwile un var teable ; cos ya zee zur, when chaps an eyepieces rins shart, a snack a geam coms in andy as a zart a meak shift, ya zee, zur.”

“Now, don't you think, sir, that you, a respectable landlord of a Village Inn, ought to be ashamed of yourself, encouraging a notorious poacher like the prisoner, by purchasing game from him?”

“Not at ael zur, not at ael ; cos when I axed un ow he com by tha pheasant, he zed as ow he as bin watchin tha gennelman shoot auver tha covers, an when tha geam cart come out a copse, in crossen a leetle gulley in tha road, thic ar bird wur shook off ; an thinkin twur a pity he shood lay there, he picked un up, an brought un ta I, an I gied un haighteen pence var'n, ya zee, zur.”

“Then you believed his story?” “Zartinly I did zur, ar I warn I shudden a bought un.” “I suppose not,” said the lawyer, very sarcastically.

“Now sir, supposing the prisoner's tale was true, which I very much doubt ; don't you think, if he had been an honest man, he would have called out to the driver to stop, and handed the pheasant to him?”

“Zartinly I do zur, an that's jist what I twould un ; bit a zed as ow he'd got a terryable bad coold, that a cooden holler loud anuff for un ta hear, an I knaa zur, that wurden lies, cos when I paid un tha haighteen pence, he axed Hanner, that's me wife, ya knaa zur, ta meaken un a good stiff glass a hot tidley, ta slacken he's droat a bit, a wur za rough an hoarse like.”

At this stage of the proceedings, the Chairman of the Bench leans over to Mr Solomon Squeezem, the lawyer, and says: “We really must dismiss the case. You've not produced one scrap of evidence to prove the accused shot this pheasant.” Of course the little man could not deny it, but muttered something about the

witnesses being in collusion, to defeat the ends of justice, and then sat down. Whereupon the Chairman whispered to his brother Magistrates each side of him, who all nodded their heads in assent. An then he looks across at Strouter, and says, "Prisoner at the bar, the case against you is dismissed, for want of evidence ; but we advise you to be careful in future."

"Thank ee, gennelmen," zays Ned, pullen down a rusty lock of hair auver his vorehead, by way of salute, "an tha very nex time I picks up a pheasant layen about in tha road, I wunt perten ta zee un."