

BLUE BILLY AND THE GIN TRAP...

By Archie Hill

Saturday mornings most of the women in our street were colour-staining their front-steps as was the general custom, as if outward signs of cleanliness could deny the invariable poverty which existed inside the houses. Once the front-steps were done curtains and bedding sheets were put to soak in the iron-hooped dolly-tubs out in the brew-houses, to await Monday washday when clouds of steam mushroomed in every backyard and the thump-thump of dolly-sticks sounded up and down the street like a regiment of soldiers marching out of step.

We boys and men hated Saturdays and Mondays. There were too many women bossing us around, so we did our best to get from under their feet until their work was finished.

Blue Billy was ever with my dad at week-ends especially, and for a long time after the keeper had smashed the eggs in his quilted-bodice pocket, Blue Billy plotted revenge. Dad helped him with various suggestions, which weren't accepted, and then looked at the evening sky.

"It's going to be a clear night", he said. "Not much moon, but good starlight. Ah'm game for a trip if yoh am."

"Ah'm game," Blue Billy said. Then looking at me—"How about the young 'un."

"He can come with we," dad said, "He'll learn more from we than he could at school."

"My oath, but that's Gospel," Blue Billy said, spitting, "We'll put a trade in his fingers and his head. Ah'll meet yoh back here at ten o'clock. We'll go on our bikes—the pony and trap 'ull make few much noise."

Territorial Rights

Blue Billy had worked out a pretty crafty move. He'd paid a farmer a pound or two for rabbit-catching rights on his land. The farm he was renting from was less than a quarter of a mile from the big estate where we'd poached fish with the toy boat, and where the keeper had smashed Blue Billy's plover eggs. It was a shrewd move on Billy's part, because it gave him legal right to be in the vicinity with a shot gun if he so minded, and to be in possession of rabbits quite openly on the way home.

We pedalled on our ramshackle bikes to our destination. We got to the estate where the big pool was, and got to work. It had to be rabbits we went for, because the land that Blue Billy had game-rights on hadn't got any pheasants or partridges, and he'd not be able to explain them away if he were caught with such. Dad left me with Blue Billy while he slipped through the woods and copses to see if the keeper was about. You could never tell. A good keeper would stagger his sleep during the day, so's to

claim he'd caught them there, and that they were legitimately his. The keepers could think what they liked, but unless they actually caught us taking game from their preserves, there was nothing they could do about it.

"Thinkin's not evidence," was the law of the day, and which was why the

"Did yoh you see any Keeper's-credits while yoh was out there?" Blue Billy asked dad, and dad nodded.

"They'm hanging on a wire line against the wood over there" he said, "just against the woods."

"Right", Blue Billy declared. "Let's pinch his bloody credits."

Now a keeper's credits' are the evidence of his work and vigilance. There are poachers other than human ones—crows, owls, stoats, weasels and the like. Part of a keeper's job is to exterminate these and having caught them, hang them from a line where the carcasses remain until the Land Owner makes his rounds. The carcasses or "credits"

and dad did so. Blue Billy put a leg in between the jaws. "Now close 'em," he said. "But gentle, now. Ah doh want me leg bosted." Dad let the jaws close gently; but even so, the saw-blade like teeth penetrated the skin of Blue Billy's leg, and small beads of blood appeared through the rip he had made in his trousers leg.

"Now," Blue Billy said, "We'm a going to Kidderminster for werk, right? And we gets off we bikes to have a bit of a rest, right? And then ah gets caught in this trap, right?"

"Right," dad said, "Ah'll go up to the manner house and get the gaffer, and our kid 'ere con ride on down the lané to the copper's house."

Outwitting The Gentry

Dad and I went off in opposite directions. Dad was first back on the scene, the Estate owner with him. Blue Billy was moaning and groaning and threshing about something awful. While I was getting the policeman, dad and the land owner had freed Billy from the trap. "Honest men, we bin," Blue Billy moaned, "writting on the ground, "On we way to get werk. We stops here for a bit of a sit down, and that infernal machine traps me leg." The land owner started to talk about trespassing, but Blue Billy got at him first.

"Spring guns, mon-trap and gin-traps wun ned illegal in 1827," he said, happy through his pretended pain, "that gin-trap ate got no right to be theer."

The owner looked at the policeman, the policeman nodded.

"He's right, sir," he said. "It's a case for the law," Blue Billy said, bravely bearing his pain, "We'll have to teck it to court." The policeman reached for his notebook.

"Couldn't we settle this without fuss?" the land owner asked, "Out of Court, I mean?"

Blue Billy groaned with pain.

"Ah reckons we'n lost five pounds between we, not getting the job we was after, he said.

Good Medicine

"The boy can come with me to the house," the Estate owner said. "I'll give him the money." He looked at the policeman.

"That's alright with me sir," he said, "If the man doesn't want to press charges." I went with the gentleman to the big house.

"A tew-thri draps a whisky might help ease the pain," Blue Billy yelled after him, "and I reckon ye ought to sack that keepe



Black Country poachers wore masks on the lower halves of their faces when they were poaching.

Blue Billy Catches On

Dad had set the nets—twenty feet long and three high—about thirty feet from the woods, back wind of the rabbits who were feeding far from cover. They sent me to move wide in front of the game, so that the rabbits turned and belted for the woods, only to be caught in the nets. My arms were tired and aching

are proof that a keeper is doing his job. Take a keeper's credits away, and you take his reputation because his gaffer thinks he's sleeping on the job. Blue Billy and dad stripped the line of all its credits and hid them in the woods.

"We'll come back a time or two and do the same", Billy said, "and it's my guess there'll be a new keeper afore the year's out." Then suddenly he put his hand on my dad's arm.

"Shush," he said, "Listen." We could hear a sort of crying wailing sound coming from the edge of the wood nearest the lané. We followed it up, and then

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"Ah bet the damned things am laughing at me," he muttered.

Dad came back, reporting that the keeper wasn't around, and that he'd set the nets. By an hour before dawn we'd bagged over forty rabbits. Every time half a dozen had been caught, Blue Billy sent me with them to the farm where he'd got rented-game-rights. Once they were there, he could



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"Get the nets in, Will," he said, "sharp as you can. The keepers am on to it. They'n turned tame rabbits loose with 'tothers. As soon as they find that the white 'uns am missing, they'll know we'm a filling our pantries."

Keeper's Credits

Dad collected the nets in, took out the marker-stakes kicked dirt into and round the holes they'd made so's the ground would appear to be undisturbed. The pair of white rabbits we left at the edge of the wood, knowing that the stoats and weasels would take them and the odds were that the keeper wouldn't tumble that we'd been there at all.

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"Shush," he said, "Listen." We could hear a sort of crying wailing sound coming from the edge of the wood nearest the lane. We followed it up, and then Blue Billy started to swear bitterly, rant and curse, my dad doing the same. Because there was a fox, moaning and whining, a front leg caught in the jaws of a gin-trap. Dad took his jacket off, went towards the trapped animal. It snarled at him like a dog. Deftly, dad dropped his jacket over the fox's head and held it there so's it couldn't snap and bite.

"Now," he said to Blue Billy, and Billy prised the jaws of the trap open and released the fox. Dad unfurled his jacket from the animal's head, and it limped away into the woods.

"Ah think it'll be alright," Blue Billy said, "Dote seem as if no bones am broke." He eyed the gin-trap angrily, the first early morning light touching his face. But suddenly a glow of contentment spread over his face.

"Prise the jaws of the trap open, Will," Blue Billy said,

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When I returned with the money—five pounds and two more added—and a full bottle of whisky, the policeman had gone. Blue Billy sprang to his feet like an athlete in tip-top training. "Come on," he said, "Let's get over to the bit of land I rent, we'll feel more at wum over theer."

Him and my dad sat among the pile of rabbits and drank all the whisky between them. They hung the rabbits from cross-bars and had a bar and

cycled home the way. I had to be capable of was the owner me, Blue doing it, I lurched and Billy and my bikes all over staggered were singing. the road about it being Some about as a Saturday "the reason of the night

you new damned well I stop singing as soon their wives got hold of