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

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

Blue Billy was ever with us. We had him on every week-end especially, and for a long time after the keeper had smashed the eggs in his guilted 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 stars tonight. Ah’m game for a trip if you are.

"Ahn game," Blue Billy said. Then looking at me—

"How about the young'un."

"He can come with us," Dad said. "We’ll learn more from you than we could at school."

"Say, what’s the stuff, that’s Gospel," Blue Billy said, spitting. "We’ll put a trade in the night and his head. Ah’ll meet you back here at ten o’clock. We’ll go on our bikes, the gin-trap ‘ll make few much noise."

**Territorial Rights**

Blue Billy had worked out a crafty move. He’d paid a farmer a pound or two for rabbit poaching rights on his land. The farm was renting from was less than a quarter of a mile from the big estate where we’d poached fish with the boys, and where the keeper had smashed Blue Billy’s plower eggs. It was a stretch-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 legally on the way home.

We pedalled on our ramshackle bikes to our destination. We got to the estate gates that day and poached, and got to work. It had to be rabbits we went for, because they said that Blue Billy had game-rights on hadn’t got any pheasants or partridges, and he just couldn’t be able to explain away if he were caught with such. Dad left me with Blue Billy while he slipped through the woods and copse to see if the keeper was about. You couldn’t 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 legally caught us taking game, from their preserve, there was nothing they could do about it.

"Thinkin’ not evidence," was the law of the day, and which was why the keepers’ credits are the evidence of their 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 botched.

Dad let the jaws close gently, and with the edge of his blinder like teeth penetrated the skin of Blue Billy’s leg, and small keep appeared through the rip he had made in his trousers leg.

"Now," Blue Billy said, "We’re going to Kidderminster. How about it? And we gets off we bikes to have a bit of a rest, right? And if we do get caught in this trap, right?"

"Right," Dad said, "Ah’ll go up to the manner house and get the gits and our kit ‘ere con ride down on the lane 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 actually and groaning and threshing about something awful. While I was getting the policeman, dad and the land owner had freed Billy from the trap. "I’ll be right," Blue Billy mumbled, writhing on the ground, "Ah’ll be right.

He steps here for a bit of a sit down, and that informal machine traps me leg. The land owner started to talk about trespassing, but Blue Billy asked at him and his eyes were fixed on the policeman, the policeman nodded.

"He’s right, sir," he said. "It’s a case for the law. Blue Billy had rabbit-catching rights on his land.”

"Why, we have to take 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’s lost five pounds between us, not getting the job we was after," he said.

**Good Medicine**

"The boy can come with me to the house," the Estate owner said, "and give me his story." He looked at the policeman.

"That’s alright with me," said Dad, "I’m the man who doesn’t want to press charges." I went with the gentleman in the big house drinking whisky which helped calm his pain. Blue Billy yelled after me to go back and keep the保持
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 pedalled through the woods and copse to see if the keeper was about. You can imagine a good keeper would stagger his sleep during the day, so to be on the look-out on his night patrols. Dad took nets with him and marked them so he'd find them again easy enough in the starlight. A strong night wind could scatter them, but he knew we could come up on the rabbits on the wind's back, and they wouldn't get smell of us. Blue Billy saw a roost of pheasants perched on the branch of a tree, facing in to the wind to keep their feathers from being ruffled. He looked at them wishfully, but he had to leave them alone.

"Ah bot 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 or so were caught I joined Blue Billy sent me with them to the farm where he'd got registered-game-rights. Once they were there, he could.

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 from carrying the "fur fruit" from the estate grounds to Billy's rented farm-patch. Then, on the last hill, we suddenly discovered that we'd caught a pair of white rabbits. Tame ones, white albinot. Blue Billy caught onto it at once.

"Get the nets in, Will," he said, "sharp as you can. The keepers am on to it. They'll turn tame rabbits loose with others. 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 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 stumble that we'd been there at all.

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 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 whimpering, a front leg caught in the jaws of a gin-trap. Dad took his net off, went towards the trapped animal. It snarled at him like a dog. Dotty, dad dropped his jacket over the fox's head and held it there, and it couldn't snap and bite.

"Now," he said to Blue Billy, and Billy prized 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.

"Praise the jaws of the trap open, Will," Blue Billy said.