

**DAYS STOLEN
FOR SPORT**

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Days stolen for sport by Philip Geen

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CHAPTER I

One clear idea, wakened in the breast
By memory's magic lets in all the rest.

TREATS MY FATHER PAID FOR—I GET A FRIGHT—
SPORTING PARSONS—I LOSE MY PHOTOGRAPHER

ALTHOUGH I am old in years—threescore and seven—I can walk the longest day and shoot as straight as I ever could, thanks not so much perhaps to the stiffening of my loins by birchings as to the reason for their infliction. Stealing days has ever been a joy to me, and I often played truant from school. I had no compunctions at the time and have had no regrets as yet, for what I learned in the fields and woods has been a source of life-long pleasure.

My upbringing was so full of the joys of outdoor life that my delight has always been in the open air and sunshine. School was to me a prison, and its teachings nauseous drugs which I avoided with all the cunning of my little brains; yet I listened by the hour, with wide-open eyes, to the ugliest man boy ever saw while he taught me to be familiar with living things. I have had kindly thoughts of Pavey a thousand times as the picture of his giant form and ugly face, redeemed by a kindly twinkling eye, has recurred to memory; but of the men who worked so hard, sometimes with a birch, to teach me to read, write, and sum, I cannot recall a single face.

'Snufiy'—Mr Stevens—a born teacher, so it was

thought, who often made a mark that was intended to keep my memory green, has faded until all that is left of him, beyond his name, is the preparatory working of his arm to give it greater freedom and his creaky voice saying, 'Your father pays for this—and this. Now niche from school again.'

I had a friend—a bold bad boy—who took the treats his father paid for like a man, and he had a sister who looked at us with wondrous pitying eyes, thereby perhaps but making us the bolder. Her face was the prettiest I had ever seen and grew in beauty with my knowledge of her; now, memories of its owner's worth are mirrors in which the face is perfect.

To stuff young children's brains with answers to questions they have not asked is the surest way to choke their innate desire for knowledge. The growth of their imaginations should have the freest scope and only be guided by helpful answers until they have sorted and given a place to the many wondrous things they have to see. My father, who loved children, horses, dogs, and foxes, never tired of my questionings, and lived to be eighty-five to answer them, so I learned from him about the birds that come to herald in the seasons, and that the world is round and has a variety of climates: that those parts marked red upon the map belong to England, and that the best parts of the earth will always belong to those who can take and hold them: that every animal, including fish and birds, has to fight to hold its own because Envy stalks in every shape thirsting to be possessed of what belongs to others: that the trout we tried to catch so often had to fight to remain behind the stone which enabled it to feed so comfortably, and that even the cow which has the head position fought for it and must be prepared to fight all comers or down she goes. The proudest strutter in the yard walks like that because

the bird has not, as yet, appeared that can make him walk meekly with the meekest of the hens.

I was full of this need to be a fighter when Pavey gave me my first rod.

'Do you think, Pavey, I shall have to fight to keep it?' I asked.

He looked much surprised and said, 'I hope not, my boy, I hope not,' in such a sad voice that I tried to comfort him by asking, 'Have you ever had to fight, Pavey?'

'Only once, my boy, since I left school, and then I got an unlucky kick, and that's how I lost my eye.'

Pavey was my earliest tutor for fishing, and much besides, and a better teacher it would be hard to find. It will be a pleasure for me to tell of him, for I owe him more than I can say. Who shall measure the happiness of such a memory as is mine of him, kept fresh and helpful for nearly threescore years? 'Sweep, Sweep.' Hear that sound where I may and I stand again in Pavey's shed listening to his tales while he is making my rod. He knew the note of every bird and could imitate them so well as to deceive the birds themselves. The haunts and ways of animals were quite familiar to him, and I think he liked to let me learn and share his joys; and I did so until I, too, became alert to every sound and got some knowledge of its meaning, and thus became a lover of the funny ways of living things. We have not sat outside rabbit holes making noises like turnips to draw their inmates out, as Mark Twain advised an inquirer to do, but I have lain by Pavey's side and heard him imitate the squeal a rabbit makes when the stoat has got it, and watched the stoat come from out the hiding-place to which we had seen him run. When in business attire he was the longest length of animated soot between Porlock and Penzance, and, what is more, he could be warranted not to change much in hue by

the severest scrubbing. So swarthy was the natural skin beneath its borrowed coat that even in his sweetest moments, when freed from soot, there was no relief to his long length of blackness, until you saw, high up, his huge red lips and glittering teeth which loudly called attention to the, outwardly, ugliest man I have ever seen. How ugly he was may be gathered from the fact that I once mistook him for the devil.

I was playing truant from school with Stanbury, and we were bird's-nesting. I, being the younger, had to carry the spoils which were gathered in a firm mud-lined nest. This did not prevent my bending down so as to get a look skywards through the bushes, the more readily to detect a nest. While I was so employed a terrible eye looked down on me from a black and terrible face, and, close to it, the half-closed tenantless socket of another eye. Before this apparition my legs gave way, and I was on my knees and, with outstretched hands, prepared to say, 'Oh, please, Mr Satan, I won't do it any more'; but my mouth was so wide open that I could not move it, and I was fast turning into stone when the big, red-lipped mouth opened, and the devil said, 'Why, little Phillie, doan't be frightened; it's only Pavey.' I don't know how I got there, but I found myself nestling close to Pavey, who was patting me on the head, while my chest was almost bursting by the violent efforts of my lungs to get back their equilibrium.

I made my first acquaintance with Pavey while hanging to Mary's skirt. Mother's spring-clean was in progress and all the furniture was covered up, for the chimney-sweep was coming. 'The girtest and blackest man in all the world, but he wouldn't hurt 'ee, cheel,' was Mary's opinion of the expected man. So, peeping out from behind a fold of Mary's gown, I was introduced. 'This be Phillie, Pavey. He wants to zee 'ee go up the chimbley.'

What a wondrous gift is that which enables a child to so quickly gather from voice and eyes the assurance of protection! This man had but one eye, remember, but the sparkle of it, coupled with the music of his kindly talk, blotted out his lengthy form and sooty face, and I was soon quite close to him watching all his movements. Mary was not a bit afraid either, although her golden, frizzy head only reached a little above his elbow, and, from the way they laughed and talked between his unhurried efforts to gather up the soot, she even liked him.

Dick Gibbs, the stableman, was ever after Mary, and it was he who disturbed the talk by bustling in and saying, 'The missus be a-calling 'ee, Mary.' Instead of hurrying off she turned towards Gibbs and said, 'Now why doan't 'ee make yer quarrels up and shake hands?' Pavey held his out but it was not accepted. Gibbs said sullenly, 'I be washed to drive the maaster into town. Will 'ee go, Phillie?' I loved driving with my father to town, as that meant sweets, and sometimes tops and marbles; but I refused to go. Gibbs seemed to divine my reason, for he replied, 'I'd bide wi' 'un altogether if I be you and Mary.' 'What's put 'ee out so, lad; baint 'ee well?' was Pavey's kindly question. But Mary spoilt its purpose with the remark, 'I year he've overwashed hissself and zwallowed the zoap.'

This proved too much for the man's quick temper, and he retorted, 'Better be overwashed and zwallow the zoap than be a dirty toad like some folks that stinks o' zoot.'

I often saw Pavey after that, but I did not know his purpose in coming our way in such fine clothes until I heard Gibbs say to Mary:—

'I'll go for a soldier or drown myself if you marry that dirty sweep. But I'll kill that blackamoor vust, that I will.'

'Ess sure you will' said Mary, 'but do it vitty,