



Swift

A L E C M E R R I L L

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CHAPTER 1

Meat for the Table

The darkness of the night fluctuated. One moment, the quarter-moon wanly illuminated the ground, while in the next scattered clouds blocked any light. He had to be careful. It had been a very dry summer. The leaves on the trees and foliage on vegetation closer to ground were dry. It was so dry that his father was worried the crop harvest might not be enough to pay the rent for the farm, let alone provide enough food to last until next year. Without the game he hoped to bag tonight, the entire family would go hungry, if not immediately, then in the not-too-distant future.

Jonathan Swift carefully slid through the brush on the flank of the marsh. His progress was slow, measured, and cautious. Each step or movement was thought out. He avoided brushing against or treading on any dry vegetation that would provide a telltale crackle. Such a sound might give away his position. Worse, it might frighten away any game. He had to be worried about both. He needed meat for the table. Taking game, without permission, from someone else's property was poaching. Everyone in the district knew that. If caught, it would result in severe punishment.

He could imagine what any tenant farmer in the area would do if someone were caught taking game on that farmer's acreage. The poacher would be lucky to get away with his life. It was simple: the poacher was

taking food off the farmer's table. That food could mean the difference between a farmer's family eating or going hungry for a day or two. Most of the surrounding property was long ago hunted out. Even marsh land was now rented, not because it was productive, but because the renter could legally hunt any game found on it. The only land not hunted out was the squire's property. There were a number of game wardens to ensure it stayed that way.

A few minutes before, he had heard a noise foreign to the natural environment. It was a warning that someone else was about. That other person might be a game warden from the squire, as it was his land. It might also be another individual like himself - someone who needed meat for the table. In either case, if he was spotted, it would be a fast, violent affair unlikely to turn out in his favour.

He kept these thoughts in the back of his mind. Of primary concern was eating. He needed food, and that meant trapping meat with snares or being able to shoot it. Snares worked better, he knew, but you had to set them and then go back to check them. In between, if they were spotted by a game warden, he could be waiting to ambush you. On the other hand, if they were seen by a competitor, the snare would be emptied if it held game. If there was no game in it, the snare or trap would be sprung or possibly broken.

No one like him had money for a firearm. Even if he did have a firearm, he couldn't use it as the noise would be his undoing. He therefore relied on a slingshot. He was accurate with it, having practised countless hours. There was one drawback; however, he had to be close to his quarry, and the quarry had to be rabbit-size or smaller for a clean kill.

He was near the edge of the marsh. There were usually ducks or even geese near the edge of the marsh. He savoured the taste of either.

Using all of his cunning, he soundlessly approached the tree line marking the edge of open water. After the darkness of the brush, the open area of the marsh was significantly brighter, even though there was just a quarter-moon.

He scanned the open water and glades nearest him, but saw no quarry. There! About one hundred yards to his right there were two ducks. They were motionless on the water and close against the glades. They were too

far from his current position for any shot. He would need to get closer, but how?

He could go along the bank, but the ducks might see him, or even worse, a game warden. Alternatively, he could sink back into the brush, move to the right, and then come out directly opposite them. This is what he decided to do.

Quietly he backed into the brush, being careful not to make any noise that would disturb the ducks. The going was slow. He needed to feel every hand and foot location to ensure he was soundless. In this he succeeded, but at a cost in time. Ten minutes later he edged through the brush only to find no ducks. He hadn't heard or seen anything suspicious. Where did the ducks go, and why?

He eased back slightly into the brush. He stuck the index finger on his left hand into his mouth to wet it. Then he raised the finger slowly into the air. The wind was from the west, toward him. His scent wouldn't have been a factor. He was puzzled, and a bit apprehensive. What had made the ducks move position?

He slowly lowered his hand as motion is more rapidly spotted. He decided to back further into the brush. He instinctively knew something was not right. As he started moving, he sensed movement further to the right. He saw nothing. It was more of a sense. One shadow in a bunch of shadows didn't look quite right. Was it a branch or something else?

Caution was foremost on his mind. He looked to his left and to the front. He relied on his peripheral vision to determine if someone was, in fact, on his right. He knew from experience that when staring directly at something for awhile, the eye tends to imagine. Using peripheral vision, the eye tends to catch motion faster than when you look directly at the object. And he needed to spot motion as fast as possible. He was scared. Not scared as in terrified, but scared enough that every sense he had was working overtime.

He tried to control his breathing. All of a sudden, his breathing was abnormally loud in his opinion. In reality, it was so shallow it appeared that he was either dead or just another bush.

His eyes snapped to the suspicious shadow again. This time there was distinct movement. It looked like an arm or leg being moved slowly to work out a cramp. But who?

Jonathan decided not only did he not want to know, but he also did not want the other chap to know of his presence. It was time to pull back before being detected. Hungry as he was, he would rather be hungry than get caught.

He resumed crawling backward further into the brush, being even more silent if that was possible. He had gone but ten feet when a branch cracked. He froze. He was in trouble, and he knew it. He had not cracked the branch, nor had the shadow. The crack had come from further to his right. There was a third person in the vicinity.

As he watched, the closer shadow moved toward him. It appeared the closer shadow was circling toward the area from where the crack emanated. There was no motion, no noise in that area at the present - just total silence. Just the same, in another ten feet, the shadow would be tripping on Jonathan. He debated whether to remain motionless or run. Neither choice was encouraging. He decided to remain motionless.

The shadow moved closer and then stopped. Jonathan could see him clearly except for the face, which was only in profile. The shadow was still concentrating towards Jonathan's right where the noise had originated.

Seconds changed to minutes. No one moved. Then Jonathan saw silent movement from the shadow. He did not register the movement until he heard the click of the hammer being cocked. He dared not move or make a sound lest the musket be swivelled toward him.

Jonathan had to master the fear that was threatening to overcome him. He stopped breathing. He was motionless, but he was fearful his trembling might be spotted by the man with the musket.

After what seemed like an hour, the click of the hammer on the pan followed by the explosion of the musket's discharge nearly caused him to wet his pants. The shadow with the musket charged to Jonathan's right. Jonathan rose to a crouch and rapidly but near soundlessly skedaddled to his left in the opposite direction to where the shadow was heading. Whatever noise he was making was masked by the noise the shadow was making.

He put about a quarter-mile distance between himself and the shadow before slowing first to a walk and then to measured pace that was quiet and stealthy. He moved from one patch of darkness to another, always being careful to avoid branches or dry leaves that would notify anyone or anything of his presence.

He stopped and listened. There was some sound from behind but it was distant. This re-assured him that he was out of danger. Rather than head directly home, he decided to skirt the southwest side of the marsh. He figured that way was less traveled and unlikely to have any other of the squire's men. He was sure it was the squire's men who were out, as no one else in the district had the money for muskets. No poacher would fire a musket and advertise his presence.

He picked a good secluded spot and sat down. He needed a rest to calm down, to re-assess things, and to verify that he hadn't soiled his breeches. He also needed a stretch. He would never have believed how sore his muscles could get when remaining immobile for a period of time.

Jonathan sat on the ground and leaned against a tree. He sat there with his forearms resting on his knees. He opened his ears and listened to the night sounds. No sounds out of the ordinary were heard. He further relaxed. If only his belly would stop growling for food. He began to think about food. He could smell it, taste it. The image of a large meal was clear in his mind.

He slid his left hand down and touched the slingshot stuck in the waistband of his pants. He froze. There was motion to his front. He caught his breath. Not more than twenty feet away in the open area was a rabbit.

Ever so slowly, he pulled the slingshot clear of his waistband. He raised the slingshot, ready to shoot. He slid his right hand down from his knee very slowly. He had sat on a small stone when he first slumped down. He had brushed that stone aside. That stone was close and screened from the direct vision of the rabbit. Ever so slowly he searched with his hand. He found the stone, picked it up, and placed it in the sling. Now for the tough part - he had to draw back the sling and aim, without frightening the rabbit.

The rabbit stopped. It sat back on its hind legs and raised its head. It was sniffing the air. It turned its head away from Jonathan. That was all he needed. He drew back the sling, raised the slingshot, and let go in a fluid

motion he had practised a thousand times. That practise paid off as the rabbit dropped.

To be sure, Jonathan quickly covered the distance to the rabbit. Swiftly drawing his knife he slit its throat. He then gutted it. He dug a shallow hole with his knife and tossed the entrails into the hole. There was no sense leaving evidence around that the squire's men might find.

He was preparing to leave when a sixth sense warned him that something was not right. He had not been paying attention while working on the rabbit. He ducked down and listened carefully.

There were sounds - movement - and that movement was close. What was worse was that the sound was coming from the southwest, the way he was heading. The sounds were metallic meaning that it was a man making the noise.

Jonathan was in a dilemma. Forward was movement to avoid. To his back, albeit at a distance, was a known squire's man who was armed.

He decided to move to his left. It was toward home. To his right was the swamp. If he made a noise, it was a sure thing that whoever it was would swing to their right - directly into his path. He therefore needed to ensure he did not make any noise.

There was another problem. Blood smells, and there was fresh blood on the rabbit and some on him. That would make tracking easier. If dogs were used, he was finished. He looked down at himself and the rabbit. He grabbed some dirt and rubbed it over any blood that he could see. Jonathan hoped that this would eliminate as much blood smell as possible. He was suddenly very grateful he had buried the rabbit's entrails. The person coming towards him was only yards away. If the entrails were found in that fresh of a state, whoever was coming would be aware of his proximity.

Whoever was coming was not very quiet. They were not making very much noise, but enough. Jonathan reasoned that the person was knowledgeable about the woods. Jonathan risked a look. Whoever was coming was using dark patches and staying away from patches of light. But the person was either tired or didn't care about the little noise that was generated by his movement. Jonathan knew that could change in an instant.

Just the same, Jonathan felt distance was warranted. He began to move silently and kept low. Never standing, never in any light patch, making sure

he did not disturb vegetation at any level. He had covered one hundred yards before the noise behind him stopped.

Jonathan now knew he was the quarry. There were only two hundred or three hundred yards more of the woods. After that were open fields with no cover until the rise. He would be spotted in those open fields. He had three options for escape. One was to run for everything he was worth, directly for, and then across, those open fields. He was reasonably sure that he could outrun any of the squire's men. There were just two problems. One was if he was not fast enough. If his pursuer had a musket, he might still be in range. Worst yet, if the pursuer had a rifled weapon, the range was more than double that of a musket. But more worrisome was the possibility that he might be identified even if he could evade his pursuers. End result, he would be caught.

Another possibility was to circle back in the brush and hide. Unfortunately, the pursuer only had to wait until daylight, then he would be easier to find or identify.

The third option was to move to the edge of the woods, and then run for it along the tree line as far as possible. He would then duck back into the woods and keep going. The advantage of this would be putting significant distance between him and the pursuer without making much noise. If he could duck back into the trees again, before being spotted, it would take the pursuer time to track him. He would run to the next county if that's what it took. After that he could circle around to home. This was the course he decided on.

Now that he had made his decision it was time to put it into motion. Jonathan started moving rapidly from dark patch to dark patch. He wasn't sure how much noise was being generated by his movements, but he knew he was making some noise. All of a sudden he was at the tree line. He burst out into the open, turned right, and sprinted for all he was worth. He was young, in good shape, knew how to run, and fear added extra momentum. As his feet were bare, no appreciable noise was made on the open ground of the field. He held the rabbit in his right hand to keep it from slapping against his leg. He counted to two hundred and then darted into the tree line. The only sound he believed he had made was the sound of his breathing.

He only went in about ten yards, but that was enough to shield him from view. He broke into a walk at a fast pace, while he attempted to get his breath back. He kept his eyes on the ground, sweeping back and forth to avoid any entanglements or possible sources of noise. He kept going like this for some time. There was a slight rise to the west. He approached and ascended it. Only then did he consider looking back. He circled to his left and cautiously came to the tree line. What he saw wasn't encouraging. Two men were walking in the open field about ten yards out from the tree line. In this position, they had faster and easier walking. They also had a clear view of the tree line for some distance ahead. Their path effectively cut off his direct route home.

He now had a decision to make, and it had to be made even faster than the previous one. He could cut back into the brush and get behind these two. Alternatively, he could go flat out, in the hope of out pacing them to the road about three miles away. Then he would need to go at least a mile down the road to his left, before they got to it, in order to get away. And he only had an hour or so before dawn. Somehow he also had to ensure the rabbit was hidden, so that he was not seen carrying it.

Instinctively, he knew cutting back through the woods was very risky. He therefore decided to speed up through the woods, heading for the road. Fear is a reasonable motivator, so he was able to maintain a good pace despite his fatigue. After about twenty minutes he reached the road.

He took off his shirt and rolled it around the rabbit. He then slung his shirt over his shoulder, and started down the road at a steady run. He put his mind in neutral and just ran. He followed the road all the way home. When he got there, he was covered in sweat, despite being bare-chested. He was also exhausted.

But was he safe? Had he gotten away without being identified?