MAN-TRAPS AND SPRING-GUNS

By MILLER CHRISTY

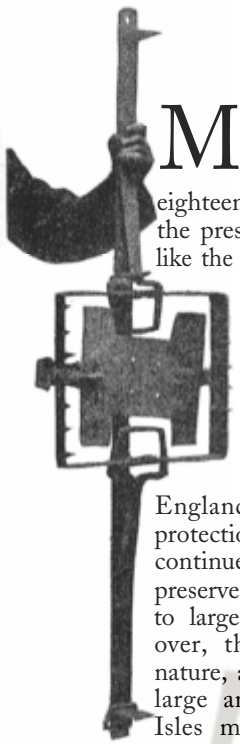

Fig. II. This Trap Was Nearly as Tall as a Man.

MAN-TRAPS first came into use in England, apparently, during the latter half of the eighteenth century—the period in which the preservation of game on something like the present system commenced. That the law should ever have tolerated their use is explained by the fact that it was practically impossible to protect game in certain localities without some such mechanical aid. It must be remembered that, in a densely populated country like England, game must receive careful protection against poachers if it is to continue to exist at all, and that game preserves often exist in close proximity to large centers of population. Moreover, the English are sportsmen by nature, and the sporting interest is very large and influential. In the British Isles more shooting for sport takes place than in any other country of equal size in the world, and the number of persons who depend, directly or indirectly, on shooting for their livelihood is considerable. These facts, then, explain the former legality of these barbarous contrivances.

Still, the law was not altogether inhumane. Although it was legal for a man to set spring-guns and the like, he was bound to give adequate notice of his having done so; and, if he omitted to do this, he was responsible for injuries sustained by trespassers. Such notice was generally given by means of boards put up on the edges of the parks, orchards, or game coverts in which the guns were set; but as, in those days, few were able to read, it was customary also to give notice by means of the public crier in the nearest market-town.

The obligation to give reasonable notice was made clear by several cases tried in English courts of law early in the last century. Thus, in 1814, a vagabond was shot and slightly injured by the discharge of a spring-gun when pilfering a garden at Mitcham, in the county of Surrey. He was let off with a caution, though recognized as an old offender. A few days later, however, the same man was killed on the spot by the discharge of another spring-gun, while robbing an adjacent garden. He had had adequate notice. Again, a boy who, in 1817, entered a garden at Warwick, merely to cut a stick, and was injured by a spring-gun, of the setting of which there was no notice, recovered from the owner of the gun £120 as damages. In the winter of 1820, Squire Wilkes had had nine or ten spring-guns set in a wood he owned at Crishall, in Essex, and had put up several notice boards. A boy afterward entered the wood to gather nuts and was injured by the discharge of one of the guns. He sued Squire Wilkes for damages, but the case was decided against him, because he admitted having seen and understood the notices, and he was held, therefore, to have had adequate notice. On the other hand, in March, 1825, a boy, aged nineteen, entered a garden near Bristol in pursuit of a straying peacock, and was badly injured in the leg by the discharge of a spring-gun. He subsequently recovered £50 as damages from the owner, who admitted that he had refrained from putting up notice boards, because he wished to capture and identify an unknown depredator, who had previously robbed the garden.

In effect, therefore, man-traps and spring-guns might only be set openly and in order to deter poachers and other trespassers from entering game coverts and the like; not secretly and with the deliberate intention of causing bodily injury to any who might trespass therein-perhaps almost innocently.

From 1770 to 1825—when man-traps, spring-guns, and the like were especially in vogue in Britain—was a grievous time among the agricultural and operative classes there, and poaching was very prevalent. The period was that when artisans destroyed machinery, because they thought it would take the bread out of the mouths of themselves and their children, and when the laborer, in many parts of the country, re-

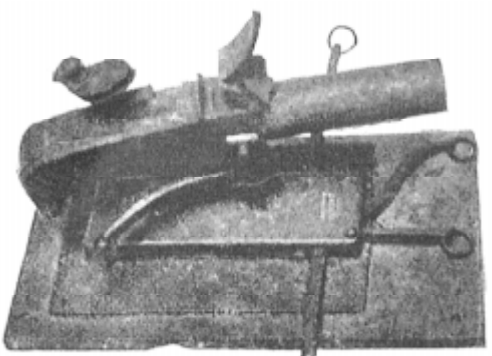

Fig. X. When a Poacher Touched Its Wire This Gun Swung Round on a Pivot and Fired Directly at Him.

ceived no more than six or seven shillings a week. In such days these lethal agents proved, no doubt, very effective as deterrents against poachers.

There was, however, one especial disadvantage attached to the use of these automatic property protectors; they did not possess the power to discriminate between a depredator and the owner of the property they were intended to protect. If the latter, walking in his garden or coverts, chanced to do what was necessary to spring a man-trap, spring-gun, or other "engine," set, unknown to himself, by his servants, the instrument at once maimed or killed him just as promptly and impartially as it would have killed a trespasser and a thief. There are on record several cases in which these instruments have actually caused serious injury, and even death, to the person in whose interest they had been set, or to his unoffending servants. Thus, early in the last century, some gamekeepers employed by Lord Berkeley, at Cranford, in Middlesex, lost their lives through springing some guns they themselves had set. In 1768 a servant maid, newly come to a situation at Paddington (then a village near London), unwittingly touched the wire communicating with a "watch-gun" which her master had set, unknown to herself, to protect his house against burglars. She was killed on the spot. Again, in 1818, the gardener of a gentlemen living at Tottenham, near London, whose gardens had recently been robbed, was shot by accident while setting two spring-guns, which had been borrowed from a neighbor and were supposed to be unloaded. He was taken to St. Thomas's Hospital, where his right arm was amputated, but he died from loss of blood.

The use of man-traps, spring-guns, and all such infernal contrivances did not long survive an attack made upon them by that very vigorous opponent of brutality in any shape, the Rev. Sydney Smith, which was published in the *Edinburgh Review,* in July, 1821. Six years later, in May, 1827, an Act of the British Parliament rendered it illegal to set man-traps, spring-guns, and "other engines calculated to destroy human life or inflict grievous bodily harm," except within a dwelling, and for the protection thereof, between sunset and sunrise.

Clearly, therefore, it is still legal for a British householder to set such contrivances in his dining-room, or study, during the hours in which Mr. William Sykes usually occupies himself professionally. The theory underlying this is, doubtless, that an Englishman is justified in doing what he likes in his own house, and that, if an unwelcome stranger chooses to enter uninvited, he must take all consequences.

In the State of New York a similar law is apparently in force. There a jeweler coming to his premises one morning, a few years ago, found the dead body of a burglar. At the inquest it was established beyond doubt that the man's death was due to a shot fired by a pistol arranged to go off in case of infraction of the premises, and the court decided that the jeweler was justified in protecting his stock by such means.

As regards spring-guns and the like, set out of doors, the law in America seems to be much as it was in England before 1827. That is to say, though the setting of such contrivances is not illegal in itself, they constitute a legal "nuisance" unless due precautions are taken to prevent injury to trespassers, who, in the absence of such precautions, may recover damages for injury sustained. Public opinion is, however, stronger than any law in preventing their general use.

Leaving now the history and former use of man-traps and spring-guns we may notice next their nature and construction.

Man-traps, though now scarce, may be seen occasionally in provincial museums throughout England. There are examples, for instance, in the Castle Museum at Lewes; in the

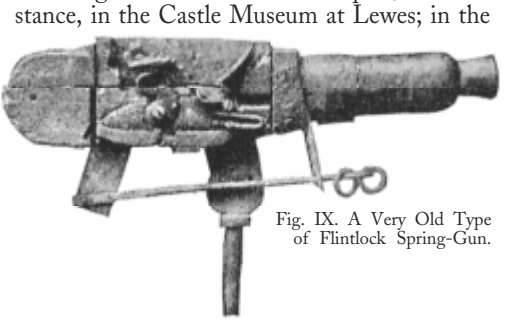

Fig. IX. A Very Old Type of Flintlock Spring-Gun.

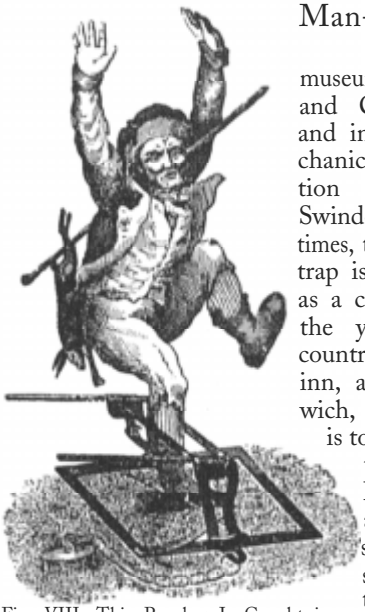

Fig. VIII. This Poacher Is Caught in a Humane Man-Trap. Supposed to Hold Without Injuring.

museums at York and Colchester, and in the Mechanics' Institution at New Swindon. Sometimes, too, a man-trap is displayed as a curiosity in the yard of a country hotel or inn, as at Norwich, where one is to be seen at the Maid's Head, and at Lyminster, in Sussex, where two are preserved at the Six Bells. Nor are leading London museums altogether without man-traps, for there is one in the Guildhall Museum, while another —probably one of the finest now existing— was recently presented by the writer to the British Museum.

The mechanism of a man-trap is precisely the same as that of the common "gin-trap," in which rats and other vermin are taken, except that there are usually two springs instead of one. When the trap is sprung the jaws close suddenly with a loud crash. Any person unfortunate enough to be caught would stand but a poor chance of ever being able to walk again, for the powerful springs impart to the jaws sufficient force to make their sharply pointed teeth meet in a man's leg.

The largest trap now known to exist came from near Stroud, in Gloucestershire. In total length it measures six feet two inches (the height of a very tall man) and weighs eighty-eight pounds. Its ghastly jaws are each nearly nineteen inches in length, and the pointed teeth, with which they are set, project a full inch and a half. Tradition says that a former owner of this trap was once caught in it, many years ago, through forgetfulness when returning home one night, and that the injury caused to the bone of his leg was so extensive that amputation had to follow.

A more perfect and, in some respects, a finer trap, though nine inches shorter, is that shown in Fig. I. It has round arched jaws, each twenty-two inches in width, and retains on its tongue or table the spikes, usually missing, which are intended to prevent the wind from blowing away the dead leaves, sand, and grass, by means of which the trap was concealed when set. It was purchased by the writer many years ago at a small curiosity shop in a remote village in Essex, and is that already mentioned as being in the British Museum.

Fig. II. shows a trap of the first-mentioned type, but smaller. It measures five feet two inches in length and weighs thirty-nine pounds. It was procured near Downham Market, in Suffolk. It is probably unique in having the teeth riveted on to the under instand of the upper surface of the jaws.

A trap of yet another type, shown in Fig. III., is the property of a gentleman at Bridgewater, in Somersetshire. In addition to being provided with long, sharp teeth, as usual, it has the inner or gripping edge of the jaws serrated, as in the modern rat-trap. It is comparatively small, being only four feet ten inches in length.

The trap shown in Fig. IV. is one of those preserved at the Six Bells, Lyminster. It is unique among man-traps, so far as the writer knows, in having but a single spring. Possibly it may have been intended to catch foxes or dogs only—not men; for it is very small (only thirty-four inches in length), and it seems not improbable that a man caught in such a trap might be able to liberate himself, a thing he could not possibly do if caught in a two-springed trap. The great northern English county of Yorkshire had several different types of man-traps, which seem to have been peculiar to itself. There

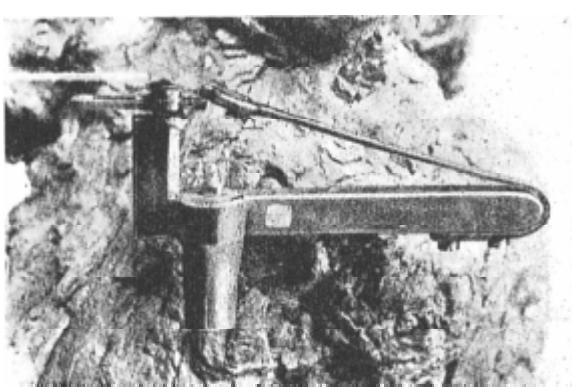

Fig. XI. A Modern Spring-Gun, Which Fires Blank Cartridges.

are two very similar samples in the excellent museum at York. In these the jaws are devoid of teeth, and are affixed to a broad, circular, hoop-like base, while the springs are not rigidly fixed to the framework, but are made to swing. A trap of similar make, but larger, more slenderly built, and with jaws both serrated and toothed, belongs to Sir George Wombwell, Baronet, of Newburgh Priory.

Mr. Oxley Grabham, the well-known Yorkshire naturalist, owns a trap (Fig. V.) which differs in construction from any other the writer has seen. It is fifty-six inches in length, of slender build, and provided with atrociously long teeth. Its springs are, as will be seen, of somewhat unusual form, but its chief divergence from the ordinary type lies in the contrivance by which it is set and sprung. It is provided with a sort of hoop, which stands up, when the trap is set, in such a manner that a passer may readily catch his foot in it, thus springing the trap. This type of trap, though simpler than the ordinary form, seems hardly so practically effective.

In the museum at York are preserved, together with the two traps already mentioned, a couple of curious old screw-keys (Fig. VI.), which were used, it is said, in the setting of man-traps. Apparently they held down the springs while the trap was being set and placed in position. Some aid of the kind was very necessary, for the strength of the springs of a man-trap is such that setting it is a dangerous task, requiring much care.

Another kind of man-trap altogether is the "Human" man-trap (Fig. VII.), which is devoid of teeth, and intended for the harmless capture merely of poachers or other depredators. It was introduced after the passage of the Act of 1827; for, not being "an engine calculated to do grievous bodily harm," its use was not prohibited thereby. The trap, when set, was sunk in a hole dug in the ground in the middle of a pathway, and was covered with dead leaves, grass, or mold. Any one then stepping on the central plate sprung the trap, which seized his leg and held it fast. It was quite impossible for any one thus caught to liberate himself, for the trap was fitted with a self-locking arrangement which could only be opened by means of a special key.

Fig. XII. This Poacher is About to Touch the Spring-Gun's Wire and Be Shot At.

We may turn next to spring-guns, which seem to have been in more general use than man-traps, probably because they were capable of protecting a larger area of ground. There were two kinds of spring-gun—one dangerous, the other harmless.

First, there was the old and deadly form, legal up to 1827, and capable (in the words of the Act of Parliament) of inflicting "grievous bodily harm." Those were usually set a foot or so above the ground, in game coverts, orchards, or gardens, and were able to kill or maim any invader, whether in the shape of man or dog, who might chance to touch the concealed wire by means of which they were fired. This wire was usually smoked by being passed through the flame of a candle or lamp, so that it might not glisten in the sunlight and thus render its presence obvious. In many cases, apparently, the spring-gun of a century ago was merely an ordinary fowling-piece which had become old and rusted, or had had its muzzle blown off by accident. Probably even an old pistol was often made to serve. Nevertheless, there was also a special form of gun, made solely for use as a spring-gun. These spring-guns proper consist of a large bell-mouthed barrel, probably taken out of an old blunderbuss, almost entirely enclosed in a large wooden stock, bound round with strong iron bands, and fired by means of the old flintlock. Below is an iron spike which, when set in a hole on the top of a post, serves to support the gun and allows it to turn as on a pivot. The spike is also hinged, so that the muzzle of the gun may be pointed either up hill or down.

When set, these guns were provided with three wires, which were stretched through the wood or garden at right angles with one another, each being affixed to one of the three rings with which the trigger-bar is provided. If a poacher came into contact with any one of these wires, the gun at once swung round on its spike, until it pointed directly along the wire in question, when (the pull on the trigger being in the right direction) the gun was fired and the unfortunate poacher immediately received a charge of slugs or a bullet in his leg or body—often with fatal results, as has been shown.

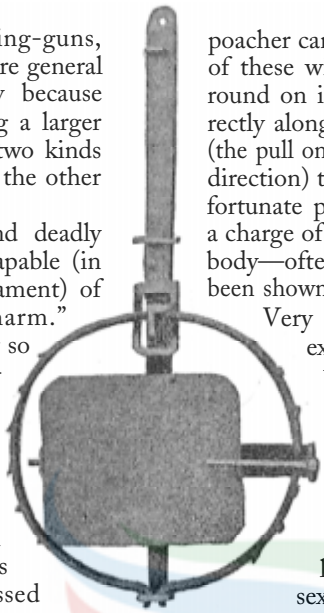

Fig. IV. Single-Spring Man-Trap, Thirty-Four Inches Long.

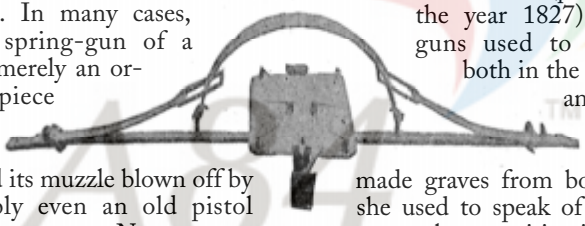

Fig. I. A Sixty-Five Inch Man-Trap from the British Museum.

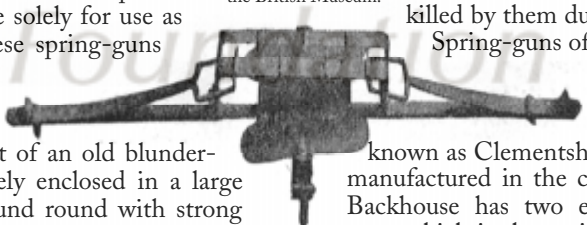

Fig. III. Like a Modern Bear Trap, This Has Teeth Which Cut and Hold.

Fig. VI. Screw-Keys Which Held the Man-Trap Springs While the Trap Was Being Set.

Very few guns of this type now exist. Mr. Backhouse and the writer both own examples. There is one (Fig. IX.) in the museum at Colchester; one in the Epping Forest Museum at Chingford, and two in the possession of the Rev. J. Whitaker Maitland, of Loughton Hall, Essex. The mother of this gentleman, who died recently at the age of ninety, could distinctly remember the time (previous, of course, to the year 1827) when these two guns used to be set regularly, both in the gardens of the hall and in the adjoining churchyard, to protect newly made graves from body-snatchers; and she used to speak of the relief she felt when, on rising in the morning, she learned that no trespassers had been killed by them during the night.

Spring-guns of the same general type as the above, but more elaborate, and known as Clementshaw's patent, were manufactured in the city of York. Mr. Backhouse has two examples, one of which is shown in Fig. X. It consists of a large flintlock pistol, which swings round on a pivot, and is mounted on a flat base. There are no fewer than five triggers to which wires are intended to be attached, each one of which, when pulled, swings the pistol round and fires it in the desired direction.

When an ordillary gun was used as a spring-gun, it was usually set with its butt against the trunk of a tree, supported by stout forked stakes stuck upright in the ground. As, in this case, the gun could not

swing round, a single wire only was used, and the gun was pointed either along the wire or at the spot where it crossed a ride or footpath. The wire was carried round the back of the tree before being attached to the trigger, so that the pull might be in the right direction to fire the gun—namely, backward.

There remains for notice the modern harmless spring-gun. Guns of this typo are still used commonly by English gamekeepers for the protection of their pheasants during the breeding season. Though true spring-guns, being tired by means of concealed wires stretched through the breeding coverts, exactly as were the old deadly spring-guns, they are alarm guns merely, and are intended to do no more than give the keeper warning when trespassers enter his woods. They are, of course, loaded with powder only, for the use of shot or any other missile would be illegal.

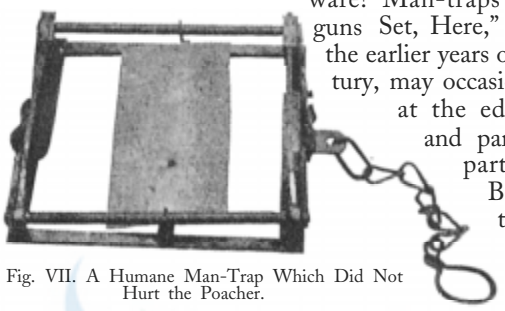

Fig. VII. A Humane Man-Trap Which Did Not Hurt the Poacher.

This kind of gun came into use soon after 1827, when the older, deadly form of spring-gun was rendered illegal. The earliest form of it is shown, set, in Fig. XI. The actual gun here represented was shown in London, in 1851, at the Great International Exhibition. At the request of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, who were much interested by the invention, it was loaded and fired more than once by its inventor, Mr. Charles Osborne. It is a well-finished contrivance of brass and steel, and is fired by a percussion-cap. At the back is a screw, by means of which the gun may be affixed to a post or tree-trunk; and Fig. XII. shows a poacher in the very act of springing it when so fixed.

Neither of these resembles; however, the types of spring-gun—for there are several—now in common use. When, some twenty years ago, breech-loading guns came into general use for sporting purposes, it was naturally found more convenient to use alarm-guns which were capable of being easily and quickly charged by the insertion of an ordinary cartridge. Such were, therefore, speedily introduced. They were of several types.

To this day the notice, "Trespassers Beware! Man-traps and Spring-guns Set, Here," so familiar in the earlier years of the last century, may occasionally be seen at the edges of woods and parks in remote parts of Britain. But such notices are, like the instruments themselves, merely relics of a barbarous past, and are only intended to convoy, by means of a falsehood, an empty threat. The setting of such deadly weapons is no longer legal, and those charged with the protection of game or crops have now to rely on "engines" which are incapable of doing bodily harm to trespassers.

Of this nature is a curious contrivance for the identification of poachers and other trespassers, recently patented by a gamekeeper in Herefordshire. It consists of a cup, affixed to the end of a movable arm, which is held down by means of a catch. When a trespasser, passing along a path through a wood, touches a wire communicating with this catch, it is at once liberated. Then the arm, actuated by a strong spring, rises sharply, plentifully bespattering the unfortunate trespasser with tar, paint, or other liquid placed in the cup for that purpose.

Nowadays, therefore, the once dreaded notice, "Man-traps and Spring-guns Set Here," has no more significance than the equally terrifying notice, "Mesembryanthemums and Scolopendriums Set Here," which a much-harassed horticulturist is said once to have put up at the various entrances to his grounds; a warning which, however, soon lost its effectiveness.

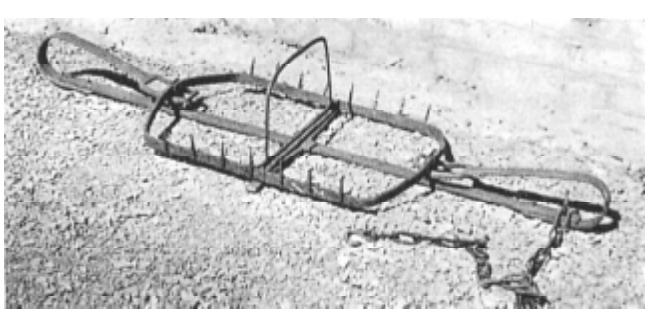

Fig. V. The Poacher Sprung This Strange Trap by Kicking the Arch.