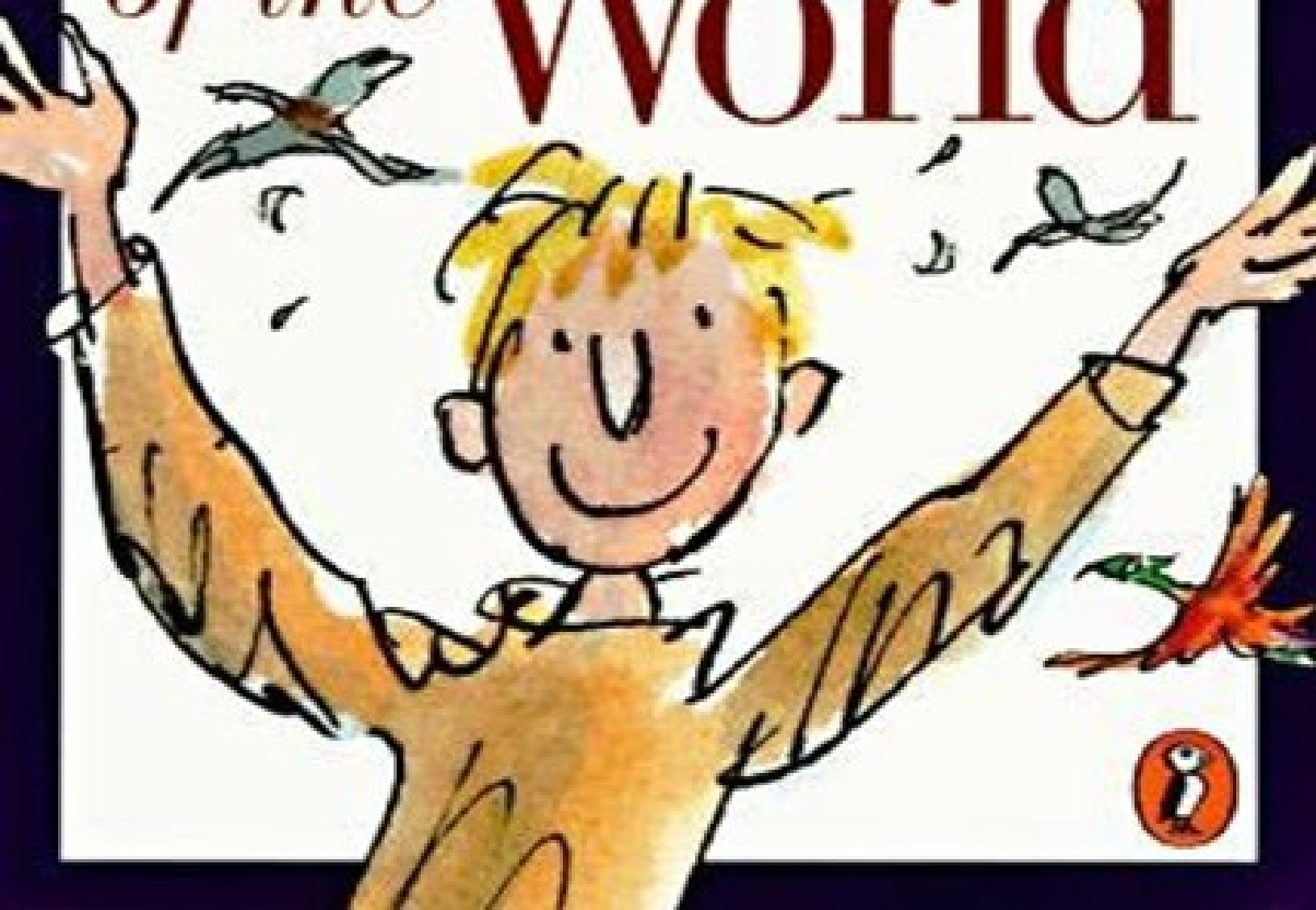


ROALD DAHL

ILLUSTRATED BY QUENTIN BLAKE

Danny *the* Champion *of the* World



Danny the Champion of the World

1

The Filling-station

When I was four months old, my mother died suddenly and my father was left to look after me all by himself. This is how I looked at the time.

I had no brothers or sisters.

So all through my boyhood, from the age of four months onward, there were just the two of us, my father and me.

We lived in an old gipsy caravan behind a filling-station. My father owned the filling-station and the caravan and a small field behind, but that was about all he owned in the world. It was a very small filling-station on a small country road surrounded by fields and woody hills.

While I was still a baby, my father washed me and fed me and changed my nappies and did all the millions of other things a mother normally does for her child. That is not an easy task for a man, especially when he has to earn his living at the same time by repairing motor-car engines and serving customers with petrol.

But my father didn't seem to mind. I think that all the love he had felt for my mother when she was alive he now lavished upon me. During my early years, I never had a moment's unhappiness or illness and here I am on my fifth birthday.

I was now a scruffy little boy as you can see, with grease and oil all over me, but that was because I spent all day in the workshop helping my father with the cars.

The filling-station itself had only two pumps. There was a wooden shed behind the pumps that served as an office. There was nothing in the office except an old table and a cash register to put the money into. It was one of those where you pressed a button and a bell rang and the drawer shot out with a terrific bang. I used to love that.

The square brick building to the right of the office was the workshop. My father built that himself with loving care, and it was the only really solid thing in the place. "We are engineers, you and I," he used to say to me. "We earn our living by repairing engines and we can't do good work in a rotten workshop." It was a fine workshop, big enough to take one car comfortably and leave plenty of room round the sides for working. It had a telephone so that customers could arrange to bring their cars in for repair.

The caravan was our house and our home. It was a real old gipsy wagon with big wheels and fine patterns painted all over it in yellow and red and blue. My father said it was at least a hundred and fifty years old. Many gipsy children, he said, had been born in it and had grown up within its wooden walls. With a horse to pull it, the old caravan must have wandered for thousands of miles along the roads and lanes of England. But now its wanderings were over, and because the wooden spokes in the wheels were beginning to rot, my father had propped it up underneath with bricks.

There was only one room in the caravan and it wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized modern bathroom. It was a narrow room, the shape of the caravan itself, and against the back wall were two bunk beds, one above the other. The top one was my father's, the bottom one mine.

Although we had electric lights in the workshop, we were not allowed to have them in the caravan. The electricity people said it was unsafe to put wires into something as old and rickety as that. So we got our heat and light in much the same way as the gipsies had done years ago. There was a wood-burning stove with a chimney that went up through the roof, and this kept us warm in winter. There was a paraffin burner on which to boil a kettle or cook a stew, and there was a paraffin lamp hanging from the ceiling.

When I needed a bath, my father would heat a kettle of water and pour it into a basin. Then he would strip me naked and scrub me all over, standing up. This, I think, got me just as clean as if I were washed in a bath—probably cleaner because I didn't finish up sitting in my own dirty water.

For furniture, we had two chairs and a small table, and those, apart from a tiny chest of drawers, were all the home comforts we possessed. They were all we needed.

The lavatory was a funny little wooden hut standing in the field some way behind the caravan. It was fine in summertime, but I can tell you that sitting out there on a snowy day in winter was like sitting in a fridge.

Immediately behind the caravan was an old apple tree. It bore lovely apples that ripened in the middle of September and you could go on picking them for the next four or five weeks. Some of the boughs of the tree hung right over the caravan and when the wind blew the apples down in the night they often landed on our roof. I would hear them going *thump . . . thump . . . thump . . .* above my head as I lay in my bunk, but those noises never frightened me because I knew exactly what was making them.

I really loved living in that gipsy caravan. I loved it especially in the evenings when I was tucked up in my bunk and my father was telling me stories. The paraffin lamp was turned low, and I could see lumps of wood glowing red-hot in the old stove and wonderful it was to be lying there snug and warm in my bunk in that little room. Most wonderful of all was the feeling that when I went to sleep, my father would still be there, very close to me, sitting in his chair by the fire, or lying in the bunk above my own.

My father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had. Here is a picture of him.

You might think, if you didn't know him well, that he was a stern and serious man. He wasn't. He was actually a wildly funny person. What made him appear so serious was the fact that he never smiled with his mouth. He did it all with his eyes. He had brilliant blue eyes and when he thought of something funny, his eyes would flash and if you looked carefully, you could actually see a tiny little golden spark dancing in the middle of each eye. But the mouth never moved.

I was glad my father was an eye-smiler. It meant he never gave me a fake smile because it's impossible to make your eyes twinkle if you aren't feeling twinkly yourself. A mouth-smile is different. You can fake a mouth-smile any time you want, simply by moving your lips. I've also learned that a real mouth-smile always has an eye-smile to go with it, so watch out, I say, when someone smiles at you with his mouth but the eyes stay the same. It's sure to be bogus.

My father was not what you would call an educated man and I doubt if he had read twenty books in his life. But he was a marvellous story-teller. He used to make up a bedtime story for me every single night, and the best ones were turned into serials and went on for many nights running.

One of them, which must have gone on for at least fifty nights, was about an enormous fellow called The Big Friendly Giant, or The BFG for short. The BFG was three times as tall as an ordinary man and his hands were as big as wheelbarrows. He lived in a vast underground cavern not far from our filling-station and he only came out into the open when it was dark. Inside the cavern he had a powder-factory where he made more than a hundred different kinds of magic powder.

Occasionally, as he told his stories, my father would stride up and down waving his arms and wagging his fingers. But mostly he would sit close to me on the edge of my bunk and speak very softly.

"The Big Friendly Giant makes his magic powders out of the dreams that children dream when they are asleep," he said.

"How?" I asked. "Tell me how, Dad."

"Dreams, my love, are very mysterious things. They float around in the night air like little clouds, searching for sleeping people."

"Can you see them?" I asked.

"Nobody can see them."

"Then how does The Big Friendly Giant catch them?"

"Ah," my father said. "That is the interesting part. A dream, you see, as it goes drifting through the night air, makes a tiny little buzzing-humming sound, a sound so soft and low it is impossible for ordinary people to hear it. But The BFG can hear it easily. His sense of hearing is absolutely fantastic."

I loved the far intent look on my father's face when he was telling a story. His face was pale and still

and distant, unconscious of everything around him.

“The BFG,” he said, “can hear the tread of a ladybird’s footsteps as she walks across a leaf. He can hear the whisperings of ants as they scurry around in the soil talking to one another. He can hear the sudden shrill cry of pain a tree gives out when a woodman cuts into it with an axe. Ah yes, my darling, there is a whole world of sound around us that we cannot hear because our ears are simply not sensitive enough.”

“What happens when he catches the dreams?” I asked.

“He imprisons them in glass bottles and screws the tops down tight,” my father said. “He has thousands of these bottles in his cave.”

“Does he catch bad dreams as well as good ones?”

“Yes,” my father said. “He catches both. But he only uses the good ones in his powders.”

“What does he do with the bad ones?”

“He explodes them.”

It is impossible to tell you how much I loved my father. When he was sitting close to me on my bunk I would reach out and slide my hand into his, and then he would fold his long fingers around my fist, holding it tight.

“What does The BFG do with his powders after he has made them?” I asked.

“In the dead of night,” my father said, “he goes prowling through the villages searching for houses where children are asleep. Because of his great height he can reach windows that are one and even two flights up, and when he finds a room with a sleeping child, he opens his suitcase . . .”

“His suitcase?” I said.

“The BFG always carries a suitcase and a blowpipe,” my father said. “The blowpipe is as long as a lamp-post. The suitcase is for the powders. So he opens the suitcase and selects exactly the right powder . . . and he puts it into the blowpipe . . . and he slides the blowpipe in through the open window . . . and poof . . . he blows in the powder . . . and the powder floats around the room . . . and the child breathes it in . . .”

“And then what?” I asked.

“And then, Danny, the child begins to dream a marvellous and fantastic dream . . . and when the dream reaches its most marvellous and fantastic moment . . . then the magic powder really takes over . . . and suddenly the dream is not a dream any longer but a real happening . . . and the child is not asleep in bed . . . he is fully awake and is actually in the place of the dream and is taking part in the whole thing . . . I mean really taking part . . . in real life. More about that tomorrow. It’s getting late. Good-night, Danny. Go to sleep.”

My father kissed me and then he turned down the wick of the little paraffin lamp until the flame went

out. He seated himself in front of the wood stove which now made a lovely red glow in the dark room.

“Dad,” I whispered.

“What is it?”

“Have you ever actually seen The Big Friendly Giant?”

“Once,” my father said. “Only once.”

“You did! Where?”

“I was out behind the caravan,” my father said, “and it was a clear moonlit night, and I happened to look up and suddenly I saw this tremendous tall person running along the crest of the hill. He had a queer long-striding lolloping gait and his black cloak was streaming out behind him like the wings of a bird. There was a big suitcase in one hand and a blowpipe in the other, and when he came to the high hawthorn hedge at the end of the field, he just strode over it as though it wasn’t there.”

“Were you frightened, Dad?”

“No,” my father said. “It was thrilling to see him, and a little eerie, but I wasn’t frightened. Go to sleep now. Good-night.”

3

Cars and Kites and Fire-balloons

My father was a fine mechanic. People who lived miles away used to bring their cars to him for repair rather than take them to their nearest garage. He loved engines. “A petrol engine is sheer magic,” he said to me once. “Just imagine being able to take a thousand different bits of metal . . . and if you fit them all together in a certain way . . . and then if you feed them a little oil and petrol . . . and if you press a little switch . . . suddenly those bits of metal will all come to life . . . and they will purr and hum and roar . . . they will make the wheels of a motor-car go whizzing round at fantastic speeds . . .”

It was inevitable that I, too, should fall in love with engines and cars. Don’t forget that even before I could walk, the workshop had been my play-room, for where else could my father have put me so that he could keep an eye on me all day long? My toys were the greasy cogs and springs and pistons that lay around all over the place, and these, I can promise you, were far more fun to play with than most of the plastic stuff children are given these days.

So almost from birth, I began training to be a mechanic.

But now that I was five years old, there was the problem of school to think about. It was the law that

parents must send their children to school at the age of five, and my father knew about this.

We were in the workshop, I remember, on my fifth birthday, when the talk about school started. I was helping my father to fit new brake linings to the rear wheel of a big Ford when suddenly he said to me, “You know something interesting, Danny? You must be easily the best five-year-old mechanic in the world.”

This was the greatest compliment he had ever paid me. I was enormously pleased.

“You like this work, don’t you?” he said. “All this messing about with engines.”

“I absolutely love it,” I said.

He turned and faced me and laid a hand gently on my shoulder. “I want to teach you to be a great mechanic,” he said. “And when you grow up, I hope you will become a famous designing engineer, a man who designs new and better engines for cars and aeroplanes. For that,” he added, “you will need a really good education. But I don’t want to send you to school quite yet. In another two years you will have learned enough here with me to be able to take a small engine completely to pieces and put it together again all by yourself. After that, you can go to school.”

You probably think my father was crazy trying to teach a young child to be an expert mechanic, but as a matter of fact he wasn’t crazy at all. I learned fast and I adored every moment of it. And luckily for us, nobody came knocking on the door to ask why I wasn’t attending school.

So two more years went by, and at the age of seven, believe it or not, I really could take a small engine to pieces and put it together again. I mean properly to pieces, pistons and crankshaft and all. The time had come to start school.

My school was in the nearest village, two miles away. We didn’t have a car of our own. We couldn’t afford one. But the walk took only half an hour and I didn’t mind that in the least. My father came with me. He insisted on coming. And when school ended at four in the afternoon, he was always there waiting to walk me home.

And so life went on. The world I lived in consisted only of the filling-station, the workshop, the caravan, the school, and of course the woods and fields and streams in the countryside around. But I was never bored. It was impossible to be bored in my father’s company. He was too sparky a man for that. Plots and plans and new ideas came flying off him like sparks from a grindstone.

“There’s a good wind today,” he said one Saturday morning. “Just right for flying a kite. Let’s make a kite, Danny.”

So we made a kite. He showed me how to splice four thin sticks together in the shape of a star, with two more sticks across the middle to brace it. Then we cut up an old blue shirt of his and stretched the material across the frame-work of the kite. We added a long tail made of thread, with little leftover pieces of the shirt tied at intervals along it. We found a ball of string in the workshop and he showed me how to attach the string to the frame-work so that the kite would be properly balanced in flight.

Together we walked to the top of the hill behind the filling-station to release the kite. I found it hard to

believe that this object, made only from a few sticks and a piece of old shirt, would actually fly. I held the string while my father held the kite, and the moment he let it go, it caught the wind and soared upward like a huge blue bird.

“Let out some more, Danny!” he cried. “Go on! As much as you like!”

Higher and higher soared the kite. Soon it was just a small blue dot dancing in the sky miles above my head, and it was thrilling to stand there holding on to something that was so far away and so very much alive. This faraway thing was tugging and struggling on the end of the line like a big fish.

“Let’s walk it back to the caravan,” my father said.

So we walked down the hill again with me holding the string and the kite still pulling fiercely on the other end. When we came to the caravan we were careful not to get the string tangled in the apple tree and we brought it all the way round to the front steps.

“Tie it to the steps,” my father said.

“Will it still stay up?” I asked.

“It will if the wind doesn’t drop,” he said.

The wind didn’t drop. And I will tell you something amazing. That kite stayed up there all through the night, and at breakfast time next morning the small blue dot was still dancing and swooping in the sky. After breakfast I hauled it down and hung it carefully against a wall in the workshop for another day.

Not long after that, on a lovely still evening when there was no breath of wind anywhere, my father said to me, “This is just the right weather for a fire-balloon. Let’s make a fire-balloon.”

He must have planned this one beforehand because he had already bought the four big sheets of tissue-paper and the pot of glue from Mr Witton’s bookshop in the village. And now, using only the paper, the glue, a pair of scissors and a piece of thin wire, he made me a huge magnificent fire-balloon in less than fifteen minutes. In the opening at the bottom, he tied a ball of cotton-wool, and we were ready to go.

It was getting dark when we carried it outside into the field behind the caravan. We had with us a bottle of methylated spirit and some matches. I held the balloon upright while my father crouched underneath it and carefully poured a little meths on to the ball of cotton-wool.

“Here goes,” he said, putting a match to the cotton-wool. “Hold the sides out as much as you can, Danny!”

A tall yellow flame leaped up from the ball of cotton-wool and went right inside the balloon.

“It’ll catch on fire!” I cried.

“No it won’t,” he said. “Watch!”

Between us, we held the sides of the balloon out as much as possible to keep them away from the flame in the early stages. But soon the hot air filled the balloon and the danger was over.

“She’s nearly ready!” my father said. “Can you feel her floating?”

“Yes!” I said. “Yes! Shall we let go?”

“Not yet! . . . Wait a bit longer! . . . Wait until she’s tugging to fly away!”

“She’s tugging now!” I said.

“Right!” he cried. “Let her go!”

Slowly, majestically, and in absolute silence, our wonderful balloon began to rise up into the night sky.

“It flies!” I shouted, clapping my hands and jumping about. “It flies! It flies!”

My father was nearly as excited as I was. “It’s a beauty,” he said. “This one’s a real beauty. You never know how they’re going to turn out until you fly them. Each one is different.”

Up and up it went, rising very fast now in the cool night air. It was like a magic fire-ball in the sky.

“Will other people see it?” I asked.

“I’m sure they will, Danny. It’s high enough now for them to see it for miles around.”

“What will they think it is, Dad?”

“A flying saucer,” my father said. “They’ll probably call the police.”

A small breeze had taken hold of the balloon and was carrying it away in the direction of the village.

“Let’s follow it,” my father said. “And with luck we’ll find it when it comes down.”

We ran to the road. We ran along the road. We kept running. “She’s coming down!” my father shouted. “The flame’s nearly gone out!”

We lost sight of it when the flame went out, but we guessed roughly which field it would be landing in, and we climbed over a gate and ran towards the place. For half an hour we searched the field in the darkness, but we couldn’t find our balloon.

The next morning I went back alone to search again. I searched four big fields before I found it. It was lying in the corner of a field that was full of black-and-white cows. The cows were all standing round it and staring at it with their huge wet eyes. But they hadn’t harmed it one bit. So I carried it home and hung it up alongside the kite, against a wall in the workshop, for another day.

“You can fly the kite all by yourself any time you like,” my father said. “But you must never fly the fire-balloon unless I’m with you. It’s extremely dangerous.”

“All right,” I said.

“Promise me you’ll never try to fly it alone, Danny.”

“I promise,” I said.

Then there was the tree-house which we built high up in the top of the big oak at the bottom of our field.

And the bow and arrow, the bow a four-foot long ash sapling, and the arrows flighted with the tail-feathers of partridge and pheasant.

And stilts that made me ten feet tall.

And a boomerang that came back and fell at my feet nearly every time I threw it.

And for my last birthday, there had been something that was more fun, perhaps, than all the rest. For two days before my birthday, I'd been forbidden to enter the workshop because my father was in there working on a secret. And on the birthday morning, out came an amazing machine made from four bicycle wheels and several large soapboxes. But this was no ordinary whizzer. It had a brake-pedal, a steering-wheel, a comfortable seat and a strong front bumper to take the shock of a crash. I called it Soapo and just about every day I would take it up to the top of the hill in the field behind the filling-station and come shooting down again at incredible speeds, riding it like a bronco over the bumps.

So you can see that being eight years old and living with my father was a lot of fun. But I was impatient to be nine. I reckoned that being nine would be even more fun than being eight.

As it turned out, I was not altogether right about this.

My ninth year was certainly more *exciting* than any of the others. But not all of it was exactly what you would call fun.

4

My Father's Deep Dark Secret

Here I am at the age of nine. This picture was made just before all the excitement started and I didn't have a worry in the world.

You will learn as you get older, just as I learned that autumn, that no father is perfect. Grown-ups are complicated creatures, full of quirks and secrets. Some have quirkier quirks and deeper secrets than others, but all of them, including one's own parents, have two or three private habits hidden up their sleeves that would probably make you gasp if you knew about them.

The rest of this book is about a most private and secret habit my father had, and about the strange adventures it led us both into.

It all started on a Saturday evening. It was the first Saturday of September. Around six o'clock my