

Thursday and School

The next day was Thursday, and before we set out for the walk to my school that morning I went around behind the caravan and picked two apples from our tree, one for my father and one for me.

It is a most marvellous thing to be able to go out and help yourself to your own apples whenever you feel like it. You can do this only in the autumn of course, when the fruit is ripe, but all the same, how many families are so lucky? Not one in a thousand, I would guess. Our apples were called Cox's Orange Pippins, and I liked the sound of the name almost as much as I liked the apples.

At eight o'clock we started walking down the road towards my school in the pale autumn sunshine, munching our apples as we strode along.

Clink went my father's iron foot each time he put it down on the hard road. *Clink . . . clink . . . clink.*

"Have you brought money to buy the raisins?" I asked.

He put a hand in his trouser pocket and made the coins jingle.

"Will Cooper's be open so early?"

"Yes," he said. "They open at eight-thirty."

I really loved those morning walks to school with my father. We talked practically the whole time. Mostly it was he who talked and I who listened, and just about everything he said was fascinating. He was a true countryman. The fields, the streams, the woods and all the creatures who lived in these places were a part of his life. Although he was a mechanic by trade and a very fine one, I believe he could have become a great naturalist if only he had had a good schooling.

Long ago he had taught me the names of all the trees and the wild flowers and the different grasses that grow in the fields. All the birds, too, I could name, not only by sighting them but by listening to their calls and their songs.

In springtime we would hunt for birds' nests along the way, and when we found one he would lift me up on to his shoulders so I could peer into it and see the eggs. But I was never allowed to touch them.

My father told me a nest with eggs in it was one of the most beautiful things in the world. I thought so too. The nest of a song-thrush, for instance, lined inside with dry mud as smooth as polished wood, and with five eggs of the purest blue speckled with black dots. And the skylark, whose nest we once found right in the middle of a field, in a grassy clump on the ground. It was hardly a nest at all, just a little hollow place in the grass, and in it were six small eggs, deep brown and white.

"Why does the skylark make its nest on the ground where the cows can trample it?" I asked.

"Nobody knows why," my father said. "But they always do it. Nightingales nest on the ground too. So do pheasants and partridges and grouse."

On one of our walks a weasel flashed out of the hedge in front of us, and in the next few minutes I learned a lot of things about that marvellous little creature. The bit I liked best was when my father said, "The weasel is the bravest of all animals. The mother will fight to the death to defend her own children. She will never run away, not even from a fox which is one hundred times bigger than her. She will stay beside her nest and fight the fox until she is killed."

Another time, when I said, "Just listen to that grasshopper, Dad," he said, "No, that's not a grasshopper, my love. It's a cricket. And did you know that crickets have their ears in their legs?"

"It's not true."

"It's absolutely true. And grasshoppers have theirs in the sides of their tummies. They are lucky to be able to hear at all because nearly all the vast hordes of insects on this earth are deaf as well as dumb and live in a silent world."

On this Thursday, on this particular walk to school, there was an old frog croaking in the stream behind the hedge as we went by.

"Can you hear him, Danny?"

"Yes," I said.

"That is a bullfrog calling to his wife. He does it by blowing out his dewlap and letting it go with a burp."

"What is a dewlap?" I asked.

"It's the loose skin on his throat. He can blow it up just like a little balloon."

"What happens when his wife hears him?"

"She goes hopping over to him. She is very happy to have been invited. But I'll tell you something very funny about the old bullfrog. He often becomes so pleased with the sound of his own voice that his wife has to nudge him several times before he'll stop his burping and turn round to hug her."

That made me laugh.

"Don't laugh too loud," he said, twinkling at me with his eyes. "We men are not so very different from the bullfrog."

We parted at the school gates and my father went off to buy the raisins. Other children were streaming in through the gates and heading up the path to the front door of the school. I joined them but kept silent. I was the keeper of a deep secret and a careless word from me could blow the lid off the greatest poaching expedition the world would ever see.

Ours was just a small village school, a squat ugly red-brick building with no upstairs rooms at all. Above the front door was a big grey block of stone cemented into the brickwork, and on the stone it said, THIS SCHOOL WAS ERECTED IN 1902 TO COMMEMORATE THE CORONATION OF ROYAL HIGHNESS KING EDWARD VII must have read that thing a thousand times. Every time I

went in the door it hit me in the eye. I suppose that's what it was there for. But it's pretty boring to read the same old words over and over again, and I often thought how nice it would be if they put something different up there every day, something really interesting. My father would have done it for them beautifully. He could have written it with a bit of chalk on the smooth grey stone and each morning it would have been something new. He would have said things like, DID YOU KNOW THAT THE LITTLE YELLOW CLOVER BUTTERFLY OFTEN CARRIES HIS WIFE AROUND ON HIS BACK. Other time he might have said, THE GUPPY HAS FUNNY HABITS. WHEN HE FALLS IN LOVE WITH ANOTHER GUPPY, HE BITES HER ON THE BOTTOM. And another time, DID YOU KNOW THAT THE DEATH'S-HEAD MOTH CAN SQUEAK. And then again, BIRDS HAVE ALMOST NO SENSE OF SMELL. BUT THEY HAVE GOOD EYESIGHT AND THEY LOVE RED COLOURS. And perhaps another time he would get out his chalk and write, SOME BEES HAVE TONGUES WHICH THEY CAN UNROLL UNTIL THEY ARE NEARLY TWICE AS LONG AS THE BEE ITSELF. THIS IS TO ALLOW THEM TO GATHER NECTAR FROM FLOWERS THAT HAVE VERY LONG NARROW OPENINGS. Or she might have written, I'LL BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW THAT IN SOME BIG ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSES, THE BUTLER STILL HAS TO IRON THE MORNING NEWSPAPER BEFORE PUTTING IT ON HIS MASTER'S BREAKFAST-TABLE.

There were about sixty boys and girls in our school and their ages went from five to eleven. We had four classrooms and four teachers.

Miss Birdseye taught the kindergarten, the five-year-olds and six-year-olds, and she was a really nice person. She used to keep a bag of aniseed balls in the drawer of her desk, and anyone who did good work would be given one aniseed ball to suck right there and then during the lesson. The trick with aniseed balls is never to bite them. If you keep rolling them round your mouth, they will dissolve slowly of their own accord, and then, right in the very centre, you will find a tiny little brown seed. This is the aniseed itself, and when you crush it between your teeth it has a fabulous taste. My father told me that dogs go crazy about it. When there aren't any foxes around, the huntsman will drag a bag of aniseed for miles and miles over the countryside, and the foxhounds will follow the scent because they love it so. This is known as a drag hunt.

The seven- and eight-year-olds were taught by Mr Corrado and he was also a decent person. He was a very old teacher, probably sixty or more, but that didn't seem to stop him being in love with Miss Birdseye. We knew he was in love with her because he always gave her the best bits of meat at lunch when it was his turn to do the serving. And when she smiled at him he would smile back at her in the soppiest way you can imagine, showing all his front teeth, top and bottom, and most of the others as well.

A teacher called Captain Lancaster took the nine- and ten-year-olds and this year that included me. Captain Lancaster, known sometimes as Lankers, was a horrid man. He had fiery carrot-coloured hair and a little clipped carrotty moustache and a fiery temper. Carrotty-coloured hairs were also sprouting out of his nostrils and his earholes. He had been a captain in the army during the war against Hitler and that was why he still called himself Captain Lancaster instead of just plain Mister. My father said it was an idiotic thing to do. There were millions of people still alive, he said, who had fought in that war, but most of them wanted to forget the whole beastly thing, especially those crummy military titles. Captain Lancaster was a violent man, and we were all terrified of him. He used to sit at his desk stroking his carrotty moustache and watching us with pale watery-blue eyes, searching for trouble. And as he sat there, he would make queer snuffling grunts through his nose, like some dog sniffing round a rabbit hole.

Mr Snoddy, our headmaster, took the top form, the eleven-year-olds, and everybody liked him. He was a small round man with a huge scarlet nose. I felt sorry for him having a nose like that. It was so big and inflamed it looked as though it might explode at any moment and blow him up.

A funny thing about Mr Snoddy was that he always brought a glass of water with him into class, and this he kept sipping right through the lesson. At least everyone *thought* it was a glass of water. Everyone, that is, except me and my best friend, Sidney Morgan. We knew differently, and this is how we found out. My father looked after Mr Snoddy's car and I always took his repair bills with me to school to save postage. One day during break I went to Mr Snoddy's study to give him a bill and Sidney Morgan came along with me. He didn't come for any special reason. We just happened to be together at the time. And as we went in, we saw Mr Snoddy standing by his desk refilling his famous glass of water from a bottle labelled Gordon's Gin. He jumped a mile when he saw us.

"You should have knocked," he said, sliding the bottle behind a pile of books.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said. "I brought my father's bill."

"Ah," he said. "Yes. Very well. And what do *you* want, Sidney?"

"Nothing, sir," Sidney Morgan said. "Nothing at all."

"Off you go, then, both of you," Mr Snoddy said, keeping his hand on the bottle behind the books. "Rur along."

Outside in the corridor, we made a pact that we wouldn't tell any of the other children about what we had seen. Mr Snoddy had always been kind to us and we wanted to repay him by keeping his deep dark secret to ourselves.

The only person I told was my father, and when he heard it, he said, "I don't blame him one bit. If I was unlucky enough to be married to Mrs Snoddy, I would drink something a bit stronger than gin."

"What would you drink, Dad?"

"Poison," he said. "She's a frightful woman."

"Why is she frightful?" I asked.

"She's a sort of witch," he said. "And to prove it, she has seven toes on each foot."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Doc Spencer told me," my father answered. And then to change the subject, he said, "Why don't you ever ask Sidney Morgan over here to play?"

Ever since I started going to school, my father had tried to encourage me to bring my friends back to the filling-station for tea or supper. And every year, about a week before my birthday, he would say, "Let's have a party this time, Danny. We can write out invitations and I'll go into the village and buy chocolate eclairs and doughnuts and a huge birthday cake with candles on it."

But I always said no to these suggestions and I never invited any other children to come to my home after school or at weekends. That wasn't because I didn't have good friends. I had lots of them. Some of them were super friends, especially Sidney Morgan. Perhaps if I had lived in the same street as some of them instead of way out in the country, things would have been different. But then again, perhaps they wouldn't. You see, the real reason I didn't want anyone else to come back and play with me was because I had such a good time being alone with my father.

By the way, something horrible happened on that Thursday morning after my father had left me at the school gate and gone off to buy the raisins. We were having our first lesson of the day with Captain Lancaster, and he had set us a whole bunch of multiplication sums to work out in our exercise books. I was sitting next to Sidney Morgan in the back row, and we were both slogging away. Captain Lancaster sat up front at his desk, gazing suspiciously round the class with his watery-blue eyes. And even from the back row I could hear him snorting and snuffling through his nose like a dog outside a rabbit hole.

Sidney Morgan covered his mouth with his hand and whispered very softly to me, "What are eight nines?"

"Seventy-two," I whispered back.

Captain Lancaster's finger shot out like a bullet and pointed straight at my face. "You!" he shouted. "Stand up!"

"Me, sir?" I said.

"Yes, you, you blithering little idiot!"

I stood up.

"You were talking!" he barked. "What were you saying?" He was shouting at me as though I was a platoon of soldiers on the parade ground. "Come on, boy! Out with it!"

I stood still and said nothing.

"Are you refusing to answer me?" he shouted.

"Please, sir," Sidney said. "It was my fault. I asked him a question."

"Oh, you did, did you? Stand up!"

Sidney stood up beside me.

"And what exactly did you ask him?" Captain Lancaster said, speaking more quietly now and far more dangerously.

"I asked him what are eight nines," Sidney said.

"And I suppose *you* answered him?" Captain Lancaster said, pointing at me again. He never called any of us by our names. It was always "you" or "boy" or "girl" or something like that. "Did you answer him or didn't you? Speak up, boy!"

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“So you were cheating!” he said. “Both of you were cheating!”

We kept silent.

“Cheating is a repulsive habit practised by guttersnipes and dandiprats!” he said.

From where I was standing I could see the whole class sitting absolutely rigid, watching Captain Lancaster. Nobody dared move.

“You may be permitted to cheat and lie and swindle in your own homes,” he went on, “but I will not put up with it here!”

At this point, a sort of blind fury took hold of me and I shouted back at him, “I am not a cheat!”

There was a fearful silence in the room. Captain Lancaster raised his chin and fixed me with his watery eyes. “You are not only a cheat but you are insolent,” he said quietly. “You are a very insolent boy. Come up here. Both of you, come up here.”

As I stepped out from my desk and began walking up towards the front of the class, I knew exactly what was going to happen. I had seen it happen to others many times, to both boys and girls. But up until now, it had never happened to me. Each time I had seen it, it had made me feel quite sick inside.

Captain Lancaster was standing up and crossing over to the tall bookcase that stood against the left-hand wall of the classroom. He reached up to the topmost shelf of the bookcase and brought down the dreaded cane. It was white, this cane, as white as bone, and very long and very thin, with one end bent over into a handle, like a walking-stick.

“You first,” he said, pointing at me with the cane. “Hold out your left hand.”

It was almost impossible to believe that this man was about to injure me physically and in cold blood. As I lifted my left hand palm upwards and held it there, I looked at the palm itself and the pink skin and the fortune-teller’s lines running over it, and I still could not bring myself to imagine that anything was going to happen to it.

The long white cane went up high in the air and came down on my hand with a crack like a rifle going off. I heard the crack first and about two seconds later I felt the pain. Never had I felt a pain such as that in my whole life. It was as though someone were pressing a red hot poker against my palm and holding it there. I remember grabbing my injured left hand with my right hand and ramming it between my legs and squeezing my legs together against it. I squeezed and squeezed as hard as I could as if I were trying to stop the hand from falling to pieces. I managed not to cry out loud but I couldn’t keep the tears from pouring down my cheeks.

From somewhere nearby I heard another fearful *swish-crack!* and I knew that poor Sidney had just got it as well.

But, oh, that fearful searing burning pain across my hand! Why didn’t it go away? I glanced at Sidney. He was doing just the same as me, squeezing his hand between his legs and making the most awful face.

“Go and sit down, both of you!” Captain Lancaster ordered.

We stumbled back to our desks and sat down.

“Now get on with your work!” the dreaded voice said. “And let us have no more cheating! No more insolence, either!”

The class bent their heads over their books like people in church saying their prayers.

I looked at my hand. There was a long ugly mark about half an inch wide running right across the palm just where the fingers joined the hand. It was raised up in the middle and the raised part was pure white, with red on both sides. I moved the fingers. They moved all right, but it hurt to move them. I looked at Sidney. He gave me a quick apologetic glance under his eyelids, then went back to his sums.

When I got home from school that afternoon, my father was in the workshop. “I’ve bought the raisins,” he said. “We will now put them in to soak. Fetch me a bowl of water, Danny.”

I went over to the caravan and got a bowl and half-filled it with water. I carried it to the workshop and put it on the bench.

“Open up the packets and tip them all in,” my father said. This was one of the really nice things about my father. He didn’t take over and want to do everything himself. Whether it was a difficult job like adjusting a carburettor in a big engine, or whether it was simply tipping some raisins into a basin, he always let me go ahead and do it myself while he watched and stood ready to help. He was watching me now as I opened the first packet of raisins.

“Hey!” he cried, grabbing my left wrist. “What’s happened to your hand?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, clenching the fist.

He made me open it up. The long scarlet mark lay across my palm like a burn.

“Who did it?” he shouted. “Was it Captain Lancaster?”

“Yes, Dad, but it’s nothing.”

“What happened?” He was gripping my wrist so hard it almost hurt. “Tell me exactly what happened!”

I told him everything. He stood there holding my wrist, his face going whiter and whiter, and I could see the fury beginning to boil up dangerously inside him.

“*I’ll kill him!*” he softly whispered when I had finished. “*I swear I’ll kill him!*” His eyes were blazing, and all the colour had gone from his face. I had never seen him look like that before.

“Forget it, Dad.”

“I will not forget it!” he said. “You did nothing wrong and he had absolutely no right to do this to you. So he called you a cheat, did he?”

I nodded.

He had taken his jacket from the peg on the wall and was putting it on.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I am going straight to Captain Lancaster’s house and I’m going to beat the daylights out of him.”

“No!” I cried, catching hold of his arm. “Don’t do it, Dad, please! It won’t do any good! Please don’t do it!”

“I’ve got to,” he said.

“No!” I cried, tugging at his arm. “It’ll ruin everything! It’ll only make it worse! Please forget it!”

He hesitated then. I held on to his arm. He was silent, and I could see the rush of anger slowly draining out of his face.

“It’s revolting,” he said.

“I’ll bet they did it to you when you were at school,” I said.

“Of course they did.”

“And I’ll bet your dad didn’t go rushing off to beat the daylights out of the teacher who did it.”

He looked at me but kept quiet.

“He didn’t, did he, Dad?”

“No, Danny, he didn’t,” he answered softly.

I let go of his arm and helped him off with his jacket and hung it back on the peg.

“I’m going to put the raisins in now,” I said. “And don’t forget that tomorrow I have a nasty cold and I won’t be going to school.”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s right.”

“We’ve got two hundred raisins to fill,” I said.

“Ah,” he said. “So we have.”

“I hope we’ll get them done in time,” I said.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked. “That hand.”

“No,” I said. “Not one bit.”

I think that satisfied him. And although I saw him glancing occasionally at my palm during the rest of the

afternoon and evening, he never mentioned the subject again.

That night he didn't tell me a story. He sat on the edge of my bunk and we talked about what was going to happen the next day up in Hazell's Wood. He got me so steamed up and excited about it, I couldn't get to sleep. I think he must have got himself steamed up almost as much because after he had undressed and climbed into his own bunk, I heard him twisting and turning all over the place. He couldn't get to sleep either.

At about ten-thirty, he climbed out of his bunk and put the kettle on.

“What's the matter, Dad?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Shall we have a midnight feast?”

“Yes, let's do that.”

He lit the lamp in the ceiling and opened a tin of tuna and made a delicious sandwich for each of us. Also hot chocolate for me, and tea for him. Then we started talking about the pheasants and about Hazell's Wood all over again.

It was pretty late before we got to sleep.

13

Friday

When my father woke me at six o'clock next morning, I knew at once that this was the day of days. It was the day I longed for and the day I dreaded. It was also the day of butterflies in the stomach except that they were worse than butterflies. They were snakes. I had snakes in the stomach the moment I opened my eyes on that Friday morning.

The first thing I did after I had got dressed was to hang the SORRY CLOSED notice on one of the pumps. We had a quick breakfast, then the two of us sat down together at the table in the caravan to prepare the raisins. They were plump and soft and swollen from being soaked in water, and when you nicked them with a razor-blade the skin sprang open and the jelly stuff inside squeezed out as easily as you could wish.

I slit the raisins while my father opened the capsules. He opened only one at a time and poured the white powder on to a piece of paper. Then he divided it into four tiny piles with the blade of a knife. Each pile was carefully scooped up and put into a single raisin. A needle and black cotton finished the job. The sewing up was the hardest part, and my father did most of that. It took about two minutes to do one raisin from start to finish. I enjoyed it. It was fun.

“Your mother was wonderful at sewing things,” my father said. “She’d have had these raisins done in no time.”

I didn’t say anything. I never knew quite what to say when he talked about my mother.

“Did you know she used to make all my clothes herself, Danny? Everything I wore.”

“Even socks and sweaters?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “But those were knitted. And so quickly! When she was knitting, the needles flew so fast in her fingers you couldn’t see them. They were just a blur. I would sit here in the evening watching her and she used to talk about the children she was going to have. ‘I shall have three children,’ she used to say. ‘A boy for you, a girl for me and one for good measure.’ ”

There was a short silence after that. Then I said, “When Mum was here, Dad, did you go out very often at night or was it only now and then?”

“You mean poaching?”

“Yes.”

“Often,” he said. “At least twice a week.”

“Didn’t she mind?”

“Mind? Of course she didn’t mind. She came with me.”

“She didn’t!”

“She certainly did. She came with me every single time until just before you were born. She had to stop then. She said she couldn’t run fast enough.”

I thought about this extraordinary piece of news for a little while. Then I said, “Was the only reason she went because she loved you, Dad, and because she wanted to be with you? Or did she go because she loved poaching?”

“Both,” my father said. “She did it for both the reasons you mentioned.”

I was beginning to realise what an immense sorrow it must have been to him when she died.

“Weren’t you afraid she might get shot up?” I asked.

“Yes, Danny, I was. But it was marvellous to have her along. She was a great sport, your mother.”

By midday we had prepared one hundred and thirty-six raisins. “We’re in good shape,” my father said. “Let’s break for lunch.”

He opened a tin of baked beans and heated them up in a saucepan over the paraffin burner. I cut two slices of brown bread and put them on plates. My father spooned the hot baked beans over the bread and

we carried our plates outside and sat down with our legs dangling over the platform of the caravan.

Usually I love baked beans on bread, but today I couldn't eat a thing. "What's the matter?" my father asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"Don't worry," he said. "The same thing happened to me the first time I went out. I was about your age then, maybe a little older, and in those days we always had a hot tea in the kitchen at five o'clock. I can remember exactly what was on the table that evening. It was my favourite thing of all, toad-in-the-hole, and my mum could make toad-in-the-hole like nobody else in the world. She did it in an enormous pan with the Yorkshire pudding very brown and crisp on top and raised up in huge bubbly mountains. In between the mountains you could see the sausages half-buried in the batter. Fantastic it was. But on that day my stomach was so jumpy I couldn't eat one mouthful. I expect yours feels like that now."

"Mine's full of snakes," I said. "They won't stop wiggling about."

"Mine doesn't feel exactly normal either," my father said. "But then this isn't a normal operation, is it?"

"No, Dad, it's not."

"Do you know what this is, Danny? This is the most colossal and extraordinary poaching job anyone has ever been on in the history of the world!"

"Don't go on about it, Dad. It only makes me more jumpy. What time do we leave here?"

"I've worked that out," he said. "We must enter the wood about fifteen minutes before sunset. If we arrive after sunset all the pheasants will have flown up to roost and it'll be too late."

"When is sunset?" I asked.

"Right now it's about seven-thirty," he said. "So we must arrive at seven-fifteen exactly. It's an hour and a half's walk to the wood so we must leave here at a quarter to six."

"Then we'd better finish those raisins," I said. "We've still got more than sixty to do."

We finished the raisins with about two hours to spare. They lay in a pile on a white plate in the middle of the table. "Don't they look marvellous?" my father said, rubbing his hands together hard. "Those pheasants are going to absolutely love them."

After that, we messed round in the workshop until half-past five. Then my father said, "That's it! It's time to get ready! We leave in fifteen minutes!"

As we walked towards the caravan, a station-wagon pulled up to the pumps with a woman at the wheel and about eight children in the back all eating ice-creams.

"Oh, I know you're closed," the woman called out through her window. "But couldn't you please let me have a few gallons? I'm just about empty." She was a good-looking woman with dark hair.

“Give it to her,” my father said. “But be quick.”

I fetched the key from the office and unlocked one of the pumps. I filled up her tank and took the money and gave her the change. “You don’t usually close as early as this,” she said.

14

Into the Wood

My father came out of the caravan wearing the old navy-blue sweater and the brown cloth-cap with the peak pulled down low over his eyes.

“What’s under there, Dad?” I asked, seeing the bulge at his waistline.

He pulled up his sweater and showed me two thin but very large white cotton sacks. They were bound neat and tidy round his belly. “To carry the stuff,” he said darkly.

“Ah-ha.”

“Go and put on your sweater,” he said. “It’s brown, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said.

“That’ll do. But take off those white sneakers and wear your black shoes instead.”

I went into the caravan and changed my shoes and put on my sweater. When I came out again, my father was standing by the pumps squinting anxiously up at the sun which was now only the width of a man’s hand above the line of trees along the crest of the ridge on the far side of the valley.

“I’m ready, Dad.”

“Good boy. Off we go!”

“Have you got the raisins?” I asked.

“In here,” he said, tapping his trouser pocket where yet another bulge was showing. “I’ve put them all in one bag.”

It was a calm sunny evening with little wisps of brilliant white cloud hanging motionless in the sky, and the valley was cool and very quiet as the two of us began walking together along the road that ran between the hills towards Wendover. The iron thing underneath my father’s foot made a noise like a hammer striking a nail each time it hit the road.

“This is it, Danny. We’re on our way now,” he said. “By golly, I wish my old dad were coming with us on this one. He’d have given his right teeth to be here at this moment.”

“Mum, too,” I said.

“Ah, yes,” he said, giving a little sigh. “Your mother would have *loved* this one.”

Then he said, “Your mother was a great one for walking, Danny. And she would always bring something home with her to brighten up the caravan. In summer it was wild flowers or grasses. When the grass was in seed she could make it look absolutely beautiful in a jug of water, especially with some stalks of wheat or barley in between. In the autumn she would pick branches of leaves, and in the winter it was berries or old man’s beard.”

We kept going. Then he said, “How do you feel, Danny?”

“Terrific,” I said. And I meant it. For although the snakes were still wiggling in my stomach, I wouldn’t have swapped places with the King of Arabia at that moment.

“Do you think they might have dug any more of those pits for us to fall into?” I asked.

“Don’t you go worrying about pits, Danny,” my father said, “I’ll be on the lookout for them this time. We shall go very carefully and very slowly once we’re in the wood.”

“How dark will it be in there when we arrive?”

“Not too dark,” he said. “Quite light in fact.”

“Then how do we stop the keepers from seeing us?”

“Ah,” he said. “That’s the fun of the whole thing. That’s what it’s all about. It’s hide-and-seek. It’s the greatest game of hide-and-seek in the world.”

“You mean because they’ve got guns?”

“Well,” he said, “that does add a bit of a flavour to it, yes.”

We didn’t talk much after that. But as we got closer and closer to the wood, I could see my father becoming more and more twitchy as the excitement began to build up in him. He would get hold of some awful old tune and instead of using the words, he would go “Tum-tiddely-um-tum-tum-tum-tum” over and over again. Then he would get hold of another tune and go “Pom-piddely-om-pom-pom-pom-pom, pom-piddely-om, pom-piddely-om”. As he sang, he tried to keep time with the tap-tap of his iron foot on the roadway.

When he got tired of that, he said to me, “I’ll tell you something interesting about pheasants, Danny. The law says they’re wild birds, so they only belong to you when they’re on your own land, did you know that?”

“I didn’t know that, Dad.”

“So if one of Mr Hazell’s pheasants flew over and perched on our filling-station,” he said, “it would belong to us. No one else would be allowed to touch it.”

“You mean even if Mr Hazell had bought it himself as a chick?” I said. “Even if he had bought it and reared it in his own wood?”

“Absolutely,” my father said. “Once it flies off his own land, he’s lost it. Unless, of course, it flies back again. It’s the same with fish. Once a trout or a salmon has swum out of your stretch of the river into somebody else’s, you can’t very well say, ‘Hey, that’s mine. I want it back,’ can you?”

“Of course not,” I said. “But I didn’t know it was like that with pheasants.”

“It’s the same with all game,” my father said. “Hare, deer, partridge, grouse. You name it.”

We had been walking steadily for about an hour and a quarter and we were coming to the gap in the hedge where the cart-track led up the hill to the big wood where the pheasants lived. We crossed over the road and went through the gap.

We walked on up the cart-track and when we reached the crest of the hill we could see the wood ahead of us, huge and dark with the sun going down behind the trees and little sparks of gold shining through.

“No talking, Danny, once we’re inside,” my father said. “Keep very close to me, and try not to go snapping any branches.”

Five minutes later we were there. The wood skirted the edge of the track on the right-hand side with only the hedge between it and us. “Come on,” my father said. “In we go.” He slipped through the hedge or all fours and I followed.

It was cool and murky inside the wood. No sunlight came in at all. My father took me by the hand, and together we started walking forward between the trees. I was very grateful to him for holding my hand. I had wanted to take hold of his the moment we entered the wood, but I thought he might disapprove.

My father was very tense. He was picking his feet up high and putting them down gently on the brown leaves. He kept his head moving all the time, the eyes sweeping slowly from side to side, searching for danger. I tried doing the same, but soon I began to see a keeper behind every tree, so I gave it up.

We went on like this for maybe four or five minutes, going slowly deeper and deeper into the wood.

Then a large patch of sky appeared ahead of us in the roof of the forest, and I knew that this must be the clearing. My father had told me that the clearing was the place where the young birds were introduced into the wood in early July, where they were fed and watered and guarded by the keepers, and where many of them stayed from force of habit until the shooting began. “There’s always plenty of pheasants in the clearing,” my father had said.

“And keepers, Dad?”

“Yes,” he had said. “But there’s thick bushes all around and that helps.”

The clearing was about a hundred yards ahead of us. We stopped behind a big tree while my father let

his eyes travel very slowly all round. He was checking each little shadow and every part of the wood within sight.

“We’re going to have to crawl the next bit,” he whispered, letting go of my hand. “Keep close behind me all the time, Danny, and do exactly as I do. If you see me lie flat on my face, you do the same. Right?”

“Right,” I whispered back.

“Off we go then. This is it!”

My father got down on his hands and knees and started crawling. I followed. He moved surprisingly fast on all fours and I had quite a job to keep up with him. Every few seconds he would glance back at me to see if I was all right, and each time he did so, I gave him a nod and a smile.

We crawled on and on, and then at last we were kneeling safely behind a big clump of bushes right on the edge of the clearing. My father was nudging me with his elbow and pointing through the branches at the pheasants.

The place was absolutely stiff with them. There must have been at least two hundred huge birds strutting around among the tree-stumps.

“You see what I mean?” he whispered.

It was a fantastic sight, a poacher’s dream come true. And how close they were! Some of them were not ten paces from where we knelt. The hens were plump and creamy-brown. They were so fat their breast-feathers almost brushed the ground as they walked. The cocks were slim and elegant, with long tails and brilliant red patches round the eyes, like scarlet spectacles. I glanced at my father. His face was transfixed in ecstasy. The mouth was slightly open and the eyes were sparkling bright as they stared at the pheasants.

“There’s a keeper,” he said softly.

I froze. At first I didn’t even dare to look.

“Over there,” my father whispered.

I mustn’t move, I told myself. Not even my head.

“Look carefully,” my father whispered. “Over the other side, by that big tree.”

Slowly, I swivelled my eyeballs in the direction he indicated. Then I saw him.

“Dad!” I whispered.

“Don’t move now, Danny. Stay well down.”

“Yes but Dad . . .”

“It’s all right. He can’t see *us*.”

We crouched close to the ground, watching the keeper. He was a smallish man with a cap on his head and a big double-barrelled shotgun under his arm. He never moved. He was like a little post standing there.

“Should we go?” I whispered.

The keeper’s face was shadowed by the peak of his cap, but it seemed to me he was looking straight at us.

“Should we go, Dad?”

“Hush,” my father said.

Slowly, never taking his eyes from the keeper, he reached into his pocket and brought out a single raisin. He placed it in the palm of his right hand, and then quickly with a little flick of the wrist he threw the raisin high into the air. I watched it as it went sailing over the bushes and I saw it land within a yard of two hen birds standing beside an old tree-stump. Both birds turned their heads sharply at the drop of the raisin. Then one of them hopped over and made a quick peck at the ground and that must have been it.

I looked at the keeper. He hadn’t moved.

I could feel a trickle of cold sweat running down one side of my forehead and across my cheek. I didn’t dare lift a hand to wipe it away.

My father threw a second raisin into the clearing . . . then a third . . . and a fourth . . . and a fifth.

It takes guts to do that, I thought. Terrific guts. If I’d been alone I would never have stayed there for one second. But my father was in a sort of poacher’s trance. For him, this was it. This was the moment of danger, the biggest thrill of all.

He kept on throwing the raisins into the clearing, swiftly, silently, one at a time. Flick went his wrist, and up went the raisin, high over the bushes, to land among the pheasants.

Then all at once, I saw the keeper turn away his head to inspect the wood behind him.

My father saw it too. Quick as a flash, he pulled the bag of raisins out of his pocket and tipped the whole lot into the palm of his right hand.

“Dad!” I whispered. “Don’t!”

But with a great sweep of the arm he flung the entire handful way over the bushes into the clearing.

They fell with a soft little patter, like raindrops on dry leaves, and every single pheasant in the place must have heard them fall. There was a flurry of wings and a rush to find the treasure.

The keeper’s head flicked round as though there were a spring inside his neck. The birds were all pecking away madly at the raisins. The keeper took two quick paces forward, and for a moment I thought he was going in to investigate. But then he stopped, and his face came up and his eyes began travelling slowly round the edge of the clearing.

“Lie down flat!” my father whispered. “Stay there! Don’t move an inch!”

I flattened my body against the ground and pressed one side of my face into the brown leaves. The soil below the leaves had a queer pungent smell, like beer. Out of one eye, I saw my father raise his head just a tiny bit to watch the keeper. He kept watching him.

“Don’t you *love* this?” he whispered to me.

I didn’t dare answer him.

We lay there for what seemed like a hundred years.

At last I heard my father whisper, “Panic’s over. Follow me, Danny. But be extra careful, he’s still there. And *keep down low all the time.*”

He started crawling away quickly on his hands and knees. I went after him. I kept thinking of the keeper who was somewhere behind us. I was very conscious of that keeper, and I was also very conscious of my own backside, and how it was sticking up in the air for all to see. I could understand now why “poacher’s bottom” was a fairly common complaint in this business.

We went along on our hands and knees for about a hundred yards.

“Now run!” my father said.

We got to our feet and ran, and a few minutes later we came out through the hedge into the lovely open safety of the cart-track.

“It went marvellously!” my father said, breathing heavily. “Didn’t it go absolutely marvellously?” His face was scarlet and glowing with triumph.

“Did the keeper see us?” I asked.

“Not on your life!” he said. “And in a few minutes the sun will be going down and the birds will all be flying up to roost and that keeper will be sloping off home to his supper. Then all we’ve got to do is go back in again and help ourselves. We’ll be picking them up off the ground like pebbles!”

He sat down on the grassy bank below the hedge. I sat down close to him. He put an arm round my shoulders and gave me a hug. “You did well, Danny,” he said. “I’m right proud of you.”