We sat on the grassy bank below the hedge, waiting for darkness to fall. The sun had set now and the sky was a pale smoke blue, faintly glazed with yellow. In the wood behind us the shadows and the spaces in between the trees were turning from grey to black.

"You could offer me anywhere in the world at this moment," my father said, "and I wouldn't go."

His whole face was glowing with happiness.

"We did it, Danny," he said, laying a hand gently on my knee. "We pulled it off. Doesn't that make you feel good?"

"Terrific," I said. "But it was a bit scary while it lasted."

"Ah, but that's what poaching's all about," he said. "It scares the pants off us. That's why we love it. Look, there's a hawk!"

I looked where he was pointing and saw a kestrel hawk hovering superbly in the darkening sky above the ploughed field across the track.

"It's his last chance for supper tonight," my father said. "He'll be lucky if he sees anything now."

Except for the swift fluttering of its wings, the hawk remained absolutely motionless in the sky. It seemed to be suspended by some invisible thread, like a toy bird hanging from the ceiling. Then suddenly it folded its wings and plummeted towards the earth at an incredible speed. This was a sight that always thrilled me.

"What do you think he saw, Dad?"

"A young rabbit perhaps," my father said. "Or a vole or a field-mouse. None of them has a chance when there's a kestrel overhead."

We waited to see if the hawk would fly up again. He didn't, which meant he had caught his prey and was eating it on the ground.

"How long does a sleeping pill take to work?" I asked.

"I don't know the answer to that one," my father said. "I imagine it's about half an hour."

"It might be different with pheasants though, Dad."

"It might," he said. "We've got to wait a while anyway, to give the keepers time to go home. They'll be off as soon as it gets dark. I've brought an apple for each of us," he added, fishing into one of his pockets.

"A Cox's Orange Pippin," I said, smiling. "Thank you very much."

We sat there munching away.

"One of the nice things about a Cox's Orange Pippin," my father said, "is that the pips rattle when it's ripe. Shake it and you can hear them rattling."

I shook my half-eaten apple. The pips rattled.

"Look out!" he whispered sharply. "There's someone coming."

The man had appeared suddenly and silently out of the dusk and was quite close before my father saw him. "It's another keeper," he whispered. "Just sit tight and don't say a word."

We both watched the keeper as he came down the track towards us. He had a shotgun under his arm and there was a black Labrador walking at his heel. He stopped when he was a few paces away and the dog stopped with him and stayed behind him, watching us through the keeper's legs.

"Good evening," my father said, nice and friendly.

This one was a tall bony man with a hard eye and a hard cheek and hard dangerous hands.

"I know you," he said, coming closer, "I know the both of you."

My father didn't answer this.

"You're from the fillin'-station. Right?"

His lips were thin and dry with some sort of a brownish crust over them.

"You're from the fillin'-station and that's your boy and you live in that filthy old caravan. Right?"

"What are we playing?" my father said. "Twenty Questions?"

The keeper spat out a big gob of spit and I saw it go sailing through the air and land with a plop on a patch of dry dust six inches from my father's plaster foot. It looked like a little baby oyster lying there.

"Beat it," the man said. "Go on. Get out."

When he spoke, his upper lip lifted above the gum and I could see a row of small discoloured teeth. One of them was black. The others were brownish-yellow, like the seeds of a pomegranate.

"This happens to be a public footpath," my father said. "Kindly do not molest us."

The keeper shifted the gun from his left arm to his right.

"You're loiterin'," he said, "with intent to commit a nuisance. I could run you in for that."

"No you couldn't," my father said.

All this made me rather nervous.

"I see you broke your foot," the keeper said. "You didn't by any chance fall into a hole in the ground, did you?"

"It's been a nice walk, Danny," my father said, putting a hand on my knee, "but it's time we went home for our supper." He stood up and so did I. We wandered off down the track the way we had come, leaving

the keeper standing there, and soon he was out of sight in the half-darkness behind us.

"That's the head keeper," my father said. "His name is Rabbetts."

"Do we have to go home, Dad?"

"Home!" my father cried. "My dear boy, we're just beginning! Come in here."

There was a gate on our right leading into a field, and we climbed over it and sat down behind the hedge.

"Mr Rabbetts is also due for his supper," my father said. "You mustn't worry about him."

We sat quietly behind the hedge waiting for the keeper to walk past us on his way home. A few stars were showing, and a bright three-quarter moon was coming up over the hills behind us in the east.

"We have to be careful of that dog," my father said. "When they come by, hold your breath and don't move a muscle."

"Won't the dog smell us out anyway?" I asked.

"No," my father said. "There's no wind to carry the scent. Look out! Here they come! Don't move!"

The keeper came loping softly down the track with the dog padding quick and soft-footed at his heel. I took a deep breath and held it as they went by.

When they were some distance away, my father stood up and said, "It's all clear. He won't be coming back tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive, Danny."

"What about the other one, the one in the clearing?"

"He'll be gone too."

"Mightn't one of them be waiting for us at the bottom of the track?" I asked. "By the gap in the hedge?"

"There wouldn't be any point in him doing that," my father said. "There's at least twenty different ways of reaching the road when you come out of Hazell's Wood. Mr Rabbetts knows that."

We stayed behind the hedge for a few minutes more just to be on the safe side.

"Isn't it a marvellous thought though, Danny," my father said, "that there's about two hundred pheasants at this very moment roosting up in those trees and already they're beginning to feel groggy. Soon they'll be falling out of the branches like raindrops!"

The three-quarter moon was well above the hills now, and the sky was filled with stars as we climbed

back over the gate and began walking up the track towards the wood.

16

The Champion of the World

It was not as dark as I had expected it to be inside the wood this time. Little glints and glimmers from the brilliant moon outside shone through the leaves and gave the place a cold eerie look.

"I brought a light for each of us," my father said. "We're going to need it later on." He handed me one of those small pocket torches shaped like a fountain-pen. I switched mine on. It threw a long narrow beam of surprising brightness, and when I moved it around it was like waving a very long white wand among the trees. I switched it off.

We started walking back towards the clearing where the pheasants had eaten the raisins.

"This," my father said, "will be the first time in the history of the world that anyone has even tried to poach roosting pheasants. Isn't it marvellous though, to be able to walk around without worrying about keepers?"

"You don't think Mr Rabbetts might have sneaked back again just to make sure?"

"Never," my father said. "He's gone home to his supper."

I couldn't help thinking that if *I* had been Mr Rabbetts, and if *I* had seen two suspicious-looking characters lurking just outside my precious pheasant wood, I certainly would not have gone home to *my* supper. My father must have sensed my fears because once again he reached out and took my hand in his, folding his long warm fingers around mine.

Hand in hand, we threaded our way through the trees towards the clearing. In a few minutes we were there. "Here's where we threw the raisins," my father said.

I peered through the bushes. The clearing lay pale and milky in the moonlight.

"What do we do next?" I asked.

"We stay here and wait," my father said. I could just make out his face under the peak of his cap, the lips pale, the cheeks flushed, the eyes shining bright.

"Are they all roosting, Dad?"

"Yes. They're all around us. They don't go far."

"Could I see them if I shone my light up into the branches?"

"No," he said. "They go up pretty high and they hide in among the leaves."

We stood waiting for something to happen.

Nothing happened. It was very quiet there in the wood.

"Danny," my father said.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I've been wondering how a bird manages to keep its balance sitting on a branch when it's asleep."

"I don't know," I said. "Why?"

"It's very peculiar," he said.

"What's peculiar?"

"It's peculiar that a bird doesn't topple off its perch as soon as it goes to sleep. After all, if *we* were sitting on a branch and we went to sleep, we would fall off at once, wouldn't we?"

"Birds have claws and long toes, Dad. I expect they hold on with those."

"I know that, Danny. But I still don't understand why the toes keep gripping the perch once the bird is asleep. Surely everything goes limp when you fall asleep."

I waited for him to go on.

"I was just thinking," he said, "that if a bird can keep its balance when it's asleep, then surely there isn't any reason why the pills should make it fall down."

"It's doped," I said. "Surely it will fall down if it's doped."

"But isn't that simply a *deeper* sort of sleep?" he said. "Why should we expect it to fall down just because it's in a *deeper* sleep?"

There was a gloomy silence.

"I should have tested it with roosters," my father added. Suddenly the blood seemed to have drained right out of his cheeks. His face was so pale I thought he might be going to faint. "My dad would have tested it with roosters before he did anything else," he said.

At that moment there came a soft thump from the wood behind us.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Ssshh!"

We stood listening.

Thump!

"There's another!" I said.

It was a deep muffled sound as though a bag of sand had been dropped to the ground.

Thump!

"They're pheasants!" I cried.

"Wait!"

"They must be pheasants, Dad!"

Thump! Thump!

"You may be right, Danny!"

We switched on our torches and ran towards the sounds.

"Where were they?" my father said.

"Over here, Dad! Two of them were over here!"

"I thought they were this way. Keep looking! They can't be far!"

We searched for about a minute.

"Here's one!" my father called.

When I got to him he was holding a magnificent cock bird in both hands. We examined it closely with our torches.

"It's doped to high heaven," my father said. "It won't wake up for a week."

Thump!

"There's another!" I cried.

Thump! Thump!

"Two more!" my father yelled.

Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Jeepers!" my father said.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump!

All around us the pheasants were starting to rain down out of the trees. We began rushing round madly in the dark, sweeping the ground with our torches.

Thump! Thump! Thump! This lot fell almost on top of me. I was right under the tree as they came down and I found all three of them immediately—two cocks and a hen. They were limp and warm, the feathers wonderfully soft in the hand.

"Where shall I put them, Dad?" I called out.

"Lay them here, Danny! Just pile them up here where it's light!"

My father was standing on the edge of the clearing with the moonlight streaming down all over him and a great bunch of pheasants in each hand. His face was bright, his eyes big and bright and wonderful, and he was staring around him like a child who has just discovered that the whole world is made of chocolate.

Thump!

Thump! Thump!

"It's too many!" I said.

"It's beautiful!" he cried. He dumped the birds he was carrying and ran off to look for more.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump!

It was easy to find them now. There were one or two lying under every tree. I quickly collected six more, three in each hand, and ran back and dumped them with the others. Then six more. Then six more after that.

And still they kept falling.

My father was in a whirl of excitement now, dashing about like a mad ghost under the trees. I could see the beam of his torch waving round in the dark, and every time he found a bird he gave a little yelp of triumph.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Hey Danny!" he shouted.

"Yes, I'm over here! What is it, Dad?"

"What do you think the great Mr Victor Hazell would say if he could see this?"

"Don't talk about it," I said.

For three or four minutes, the pheasants kept on falling. Then suddenly they stopped.

"Keep searching!" my father shouted. "There's plenty more on the ground!"

"Dad," I said, "don't you think we ought to get out while the going's good?"

"Never!" he shouted. "Not on your life!"

We went on searching. Between us we looked under every tree within a hundred yards of the clearing, north, south, east and west, and I think we found most of them in the end. At the collecting-point there was a pile of pheasants as big as a bonfire.

"It's a miracle," my father was saying. "It's an absolute miracle." He was staring at them in a kind of trance.

"Shouldn't we just take about six each and get out quick?" I said.

"I would like to count them, Danny."

"Dad! Not now!"

"I *must* count them."

"Can't we do that later?"

"One . . .

"Two . . .

"Three . . .

"Four . . ."

He began counting them very carefully, picking up each bird in turn and laying it carefully to one side. The moon was directly overhead now, and the whole clearing was brilliantly lit up. I felt as though I was standing in the glare of powerful headlamps.

"A hundred and seventeen . . . a hundred and eighteen . . . a hundred and nineteen . . . *one hundred and twenty!*" he cried. "It's an all-time record!" He looked happier than I had ever seen him in his life. "The most my dad ever got was fifteen and he was drunk for a week afterwards!" he said. "But this . . . this, my dear boy, is an all-time *world record*!"

"I expect it is," I said.

"And *you* did it, Danny! The whole thing was your idea in the first place!"

"I didn't do it, Dad."

"Oh yes you did! And you know what that makes you, my dear boy? It makes you the champion of the world!" He pulled up his sweater and unwound the two big cotton sacks from round his belly. "Here's yours," he said, handing one of them to me. "Fill it up quick!"

The light of the moon was so strong I could read the print across the front of the sack, J. W. CRUMP, it said, KESTON FLOUR MILLS, LONDON S.W.17.

"You don't think that keeper with the brown teeth is watching us this very moment from behind a tree?" I said.

"No chance," my father said. "If he's anywhere he'll be down at the filling-station waiting to catch us coming home with the loot."

We started loading the pheasants into the sacks. They were soft and floppy-necked and the skin underneath the feathers was still warm.

"We can't possibly carry this lot all the way home," I said.

"Of course not. There'll be a taxi waiting for us on the track outside the wood."

"A *taxi!*" I said.

"My dad always made use of a taxi on a big job," he said.

"Why a taxi, for heaven's sake?"

"It's more secret, Danny. Nobody knows who's inside a taxi except the driver."

"Which driver?" I asked.

"Charlie Kinch. He's only too glad to oblige."

"Does *he* know about poaching, too?"

"Old Charlie Kinch? Of course he does. He's poached more pheasants in his time than we've sold gallons of petrol."

We finished loading the sacks and my father humped his on to his shoulders. I couldn't do that with mine. It was too heavy for me. "Drag it," my father said. "Just drag it along the ground." My sack had sixty birds inside it and it weighed a ton. But it slid quite easily over the dry leaves with me walking backwards and pulling it with both hands.

We came to the edge of the wood and peered through the hedge on to the track. My father said "Charlie boy" very softly, and the old man behind the wheel of the taxi poked his head out into the moonlight and gave us a sly toothless grin. We slid through the hedge, dragging the sacks after us along the ground.

"Hello-hello-hello," Charlie Kinch said. "What's all this then?"

17

The Taxi

Two minutes later we were safely inside the taxi and cruising slowly down the bumpy track towards the road.

My father was bursting with pride and excitement. He kept leaning forward and tapping Charlie Kinch on the shoulder and saying, "How about it, Charlie? How about this for a haul?" And Charlie kept glancing back pop-eyed at the huge bulging sacks. "Cripes, man!" he kept saying. "How did you do it?"

"Danny did it!" my father said proudly. "My son Danny is the champion of the world."

Then Charlie said, "I reckon pheasants is going to be a bit scarce up at Mr Victor Hazell's opening-day shoot tomorrow, eh, Willum?"

"I imagine they are, Charlie," my father said. "I imagine they are."

"All those fancy folk," old Charlie said, "driving in from miles around in their big shiny cars and there won't be a blinking bird anywhere for them to shoot!" Charlie Kinch started chuckling and chortling so much he nearly drove off the track.

"Dad," I said. "What on earth are you going to do with all these pheasants?"

"Share them out among our friends," my father said. "There's a dozen of them for Charlie here to start with. All right, Charlie?"

"That suits me," Charlie said.

"Then there'll be a dozen for Doc Spencer. And another dozen for Enoch Samways . . ."

"You don't mean *Sergeant* Samways?" I gasped.

"Of course," my father said. "Enoch Samways is one of my very oldest friends."

"Enoch's a good boy," Charlie Kinch said. "He's a lovely lad."

Sergeant Enoch Samways, as I knew very well, was the village policeman. He was a huge, plump man with a bristly black moustache, and he strode up and down our High Street with the proud and measured tread of a man who knows he is in charge. The silver buttons on his uniform sparkled like diamonds and the mere sight of him frightened me so much I used to cross over to the other side of the street whenever he approached.

"Enoch Samways likes a piece of roasted pheasant as much as the next man," my father said.

"I reckon he knows a thing or two about catching 'em as well," Charlie Kinch said.

I was astounded. But I was also rather pleased because now that I knew the great Sergeant Samways was human like the rest of us, perhaps I wouldn't be so scared of him in future.

"Are you going to share them out tonight, Dad?" I asked.

"Not tonight, Danny, no. You must always walk home empty-handed after a poaching trip. You can never be sure Mr Rabbetts or one of his gang isn't waiting for you by the front door to see if you're carrying anything."

"Ah, but he's a crafty one, that Mr Rabbetts is," Charlie Kinch said. "The best thing is to pour a pound of sugar in the petrol tank of his car when he ain't looking, then he can't ever come snooping round your house later on. We always made sure to give the keepers a little sugar in their tanks before we went out on a poach. I'm surprised you didn't bother to do that, Willum, especially on a big job like this one."

"What does the sugar do?" I asked.

"Blimey, it gums up the whole ruddy works," Charlie Kinch said. "You've got to take the entire engine to pieces before it'll go again after it's had the sugar. Ain't that right, Willum?"

"That's quite right, Charlie," my father said.

We came off the bumpy track on to the main road and Charlie Kinch got the old taxi into top gear and headed for the village. "Are you dumping these birds at Mrs Clipstone's place tonight?" he asked.

"Yes," my father told him. "Drive straight to Mrs Clipstone's."

"Why Mrs Clipstone's?" I asked. "What's she got to do with it?"

"Mrs Clipstone delivers everyone's pheasants," my father said. "Haven't I told you that?"

"No, Dad, you haven't," I said, aghast. I was now more stunned than ever. Mrs Grace Clipstone was the wife of the Reverend Lionel Clipstone, the local vicar.

"Always choose a respectable woman to deliver your pheasants," my father announced. "That's correct, Charlie, isn't it?"

"Mrs Clipstone's a right smart lady," Charlie said.

I could hardly believe what they were saying. It was beginning to look as though just about everybody in the entire district was in on this poaching lark.

"The vicar is very fond of roasted pheasant for his dinner," my father said.

"Who isn't?" Charlie Kinch said, and he started chuckling to himself all over again.

We were driving through the village now, and the street-lamps were lit and the men were wandering home from the pubs, all full of beer. I saw Mr Snoddy, my headmaster, a bit wobbly on his feet and trying

to let himself in secretly through the side door of his house, but what *he* didn't see was Mrs Snoddy's sharp frosty face sticking out of the upstairs window, watching him.

"You know something, Danny," my father said. "We've done these birds a great kindness putting them to sleep in this nice painless way. They'd have had a nasty time of it tomorrow if we hadn't got them first."

"Rotten shots, most of them fellows are," Charlie Kinch said. "At least half the birds finish up winged and wounded."

The taxi turned left and swung in through the gates of the vicarage. There were no lights in the house and nobody met us. My father and I got out and dumped the pheasants in the coal-shed at the rear. Then we said goodbye to Charlie Kinch and began to walk the two miles back to the filling-station.

18

Home

Soon we had left the village behind us and were in open country. There was no one else in sight, just the two of us, my father and I, tired but happy, striding out along the curvy country road in the light of the moon.

"I can't *believe* it!" my father kept saying. "I simply cannot *believe* we pulled it off!"

"My heart is still thumping," I said.

"So is mine! So is mine! But oh, Danny," he cried, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Didn't we have a glorious time!"

We were walking right in the middle of the road as though it were a private driveway running through our country estate and we were the lords of all we surveyed.

"Do you realise, Danny," my father said, "that on this very night, on this Friday the thirtieth of September, you and I have actually bagged *one hundred and twenty* prime pheasants from Mr Victor Hazell's wood?"

I looked at my father. His face was alight with happiness and his arms were waving all over the place as he went prancing along the middle of the road with his funny iron foot going *clink, clink, clink*.

"Roasted pheasant!" he cried out, addressing the moon and the entire countryside. "The finest and most succulent dish on earth! I don't suppose you've ever eaten roasted pheasant, have you, Danny?"

"Never," I said.

"You wait!" he cried. "You just wait till you taste it! It has an unbelievable flavour! It's sheer magic!"

"Does it *have* to be roasted, Dad?"

"Of course it has to be roasted. You don't ever boil a young bird. Why do you ask that?"

"I was wondering how we would do the roasting," I said. "Don't you have to have an oven or something?"

"Of course," he said.

"But we don't have an oven, Dad. All we've got is a paraffin burner."

"I know," he said. "And that is why I have decided to buy an oven."

"Buy one!" I cried.

"Yes, Danny," he said. "With such a great and glorious stock of pheasants on our hands, it is important that we have the proper equipment. Therefore we shall go back into the village tomorrow morning and we shall buy an electric oven. We can get one at Wheeler's. And we'll put it in the workshop. We've got plenty of electric plugs in the workshop."

"Won't it be very expensive?"

"No expense is too great for roasted pheasant," my father announced superbly. "And don't forget, Danny, before we put the bird in the oven, we have to lay strips of fat bacon across the breast to keep it nice and juicy. And bread sauce, too. We shall have to make bread sauce. You must never have roasted pheasant without lashings of bread sauce. There are three things you must always have with roasted pheasant—bread sauce, chipped potatoes and boiled parsnips."

There was half a minute's silence as we both allowed ourselves the pleasure of dreaming about these beautiful foods.

"And I'll tell you what else we've got to get," my father said. "We've got to get one of those deep freezers where you can store things for months and months and they never go rotten."

"Dad!" I said. "No!"

"But don't you realise, Danny, that even after we've given birds away to all our friends, to Charlie Kinch and the Reverend Clipstone and Doc Spencer and Enoch Samways and all the rest of them, there'll still be about fifty left for us. That is why we are going to need a deep freezer."

"But it'll cost the earth!"

"And worth every penny of it!" he cried. "Just imagine, Danny, my boy, any time we fancy a nice roasted pheasant for our supper, all we've got to do is open up the lid of the freezer and help ourselves! Kings and queens don't live any better than that!"

A barn-owl flew across the road in front of us, its great white wings waving slowly in the moonlight.

"Did *your* mum have an oven in the kitchen, Dad," I asked, "when you were a boy?"

"She had something better than an oven," he said. "It was called a cooker. It was a great big long black thing and we used to stoke it up with coal and keep it going for twenty-four hours a day. It never went out. And if we didn't have any coal, we used bits of wood."

"Could you roast pheasants in it?"

"You could roast anything in it, Danny. It was a lovely thing, that old cooker. It used to keep the whole house warm in the winter."

"But *you* never had a cooker of your own, did you, Dad, you and mum, when you got married? Or an oven?"

"No," he said. "We couldn't afford things like that."

"Then how did you roast your pheasants?"

"Ah," he said. "That was quite a trick. We used to build a fire outside the caravan and roast them on a spit, the way the gipsies do."

"What's a spit?" I asked.

"It's just a long metal spike and you stick it through the pheasant and put it over the fire and keep turning it round. What you do is you push two forked sticks into the ground, one on each side of the fire and you rest the spit on the forks."

"Did it roast them well?"

"Fairly well," he said. "But an oven would do it better. Listen Danny, Mr Wheeler has all sorts of marvellous ovens in his shop now. He's got one in there with so many dials and knobs on it, it looks like the cockpit of an airplane."

"Is that the one you want to buy, Dad?"

"I don't know," he said. "We'll decide tomorrow."

We kept walking and soon we saw the filling-station glimmering in the moonlight ahead of us.

"Will Mr Rabbetts be waiting for us, do you think, Dad?" I asked.

"If he is, you won't see him, Danny. They always hide and watch you from behind a hedge or a tree and they only come out if you are carrying a sack over your shoulder or if your pocket is bulging with something suspicious. We are carrying nothing at all. So don't worry about it."

Whether or not Mr Rabbetts was watching us as we entered the filling-station and headed for the caravan, I don't know. We saw no sign of him. Inside the caravan, my father lit the paraffin lamp, and I lit the burner and put the kettle on to make us a cup of cocoa each.

"That," my father said as we sat sipping our hot cocoa a few minutes later, "was the greatest time I've ever had in my whole life."

19

Rockabye Baby

At eight-thirty the next morning my father went into the workshop and dialled Doc Spencer's number on the telephone.

"Now listen, Doctor," he said. "If you could be here at the filling-station in about half an hour, I think I might have a little surprise present for you." The doctor said something in reply, and my father replaced the receiver.

At nine o'clock, Doc Spencer arrived in his car. My father went over to him and the two of them held a whispered conversation beside the pumps. Suddenly the tiny doctor clapped his hands together and sprang up high in the air, hooting with laughter.

"You don't mean it!" he cried. "It's not possible!" He then rushed over to me and grasped my hand in his. "I do congratulate you, my dear boy!" he cried, pumping my hand up and down so fiercely it nearly came off. "What a triumph! What a miracle! What a victory! Now why on earth didn't I think of that method myself? You are a genius, sir! Hail to thee, dear Danny, you're the champion of the world!"

"Here she comes!" my father called out, pointing down the road. "Here she comes, Doctor!"

"Here who comes?" the doctor said.

"Mrs Clipstone." He spoke the name proudly, as though he were a commander referring to his bravest officer.

The three of us stood together beside the pumps, looking down the road.

"Can't you see her?" my father asked.

Far away in the distance I could just make out a small figure advancing towards us.

"What's she pushing, Dad?"

My father gave me sly look.

"There's only one way of delivering pheasants safely," he said, "and that's under a baby. Isn't that right, Doctor?"

"Under a *baby*?" Doc Spencer said.

"Of course. In a pram with the baby on top."

"Fantastic!" the doctor said.

"My old dad thought that one up many years ago," my father said, "and it's never been known to fail yet."

"It's brilliant," Doc Spencer said. "Only a brilliant mind could think of a thing like that."

"He was a brilliant man," my father said. "Can you see her now, Doctor? And that'll be young Christopher Clipstone sitting up in the pram. He's one and a half. A lovely child."

"I birthed him," Doc Spencer said. "He weighed eight pounds three ounces."

I could just make out the small dot of a baby sitting high up in the pram, which had its hood folded down.

"There's more than one hundred pheasants under that little nipper," my father said happily. "Just imagine it."

"You can't put a hundred pheasants in a child's perambulator!" Doc Spencer said. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"You can if it's been specially made for the job," my father said. "This one is built extra-long and extra-wide and it's got an extra-deep well underneath. Listen, you could push a cow around in there if you wanted to, let alone a hundred pheasants and a baby!"

"Did you make it yourself, Dad?" I asked.

"More or less, Danny. You remember when I walked you to school and then went off to buy the raisins?"

"The day before yesterday," I said.

"Yes. And after that I went straight on to the vicarage and converted their pram into this. Special Extra-large Poacher's Model. It's a beauty, really it is. You wait till you see it. And Mrs Clipstone says it pushes even easier than her ordinary one. She did a practice circuit with it in her back-yard as soon as I'd finished it."

"Fantastic," the doctor said again. "Absolutely fantastic."

"Normally," my father went on, "an ordinary bought pram is all you'd ever need. But then no one's ever had over a hundred pheasants to deliver before now."

"Where does the baby sit?" the doctor asked.

"On top, of course," my father said. "All you need is a sheet to cover them and the baby sits on the

sheet. A bunch of pheasants makes a nice soft mattress for any child."

"I don't doubt it," the doctor said.

"He'll be having a very comfortable ride today, young Christopher," my father said.

We stood beside the pumps waiting for Mrs Clipstone to arrive. It was the first of October and one of those warm windless autumn mornings with a darkening sky and a smell of thunder in the air.

What was so marvellous about my father, I thought, was the way he always surprised you. It was impossible to be with him for long without being surprised and astounded by one thing or another. He was like a conjuror bringing things out of a hat. Right now it was the pram and the baby. In a few minutes it would be something else again, I felt sure of that.

"Right through the village bold as brass," my father said. "Good for her!"

"She seems in an awful hurry, Dad," I said. "She's sort of half-running. Don't you think she's sort of half-running, Doctor Spencer?"

"I imagine she's just a bit anxious to unload her cargo," the doctor said.

My father squinted down the road at the approaching figure. "She does appear to be going a bit quick, doesn't she?" he said carefully.

"She's going *very* quick," I said.

There was a pause. My father was beginning to stare hard at the lady in the distance.

"Perhaps she doesn't want to be caught in the rain," he said. "I'll bet that's exactly what it is. She thinks it's going to rain and she doesn't want the baby to get wet."

"She could put the hood up," I said.

He didn't answer this.

"She's *running!*" Doc Spencer cried. "Look!"

It was true. Mrs Clipstone had suddenly broken into a full sprint.

My father stood very still, staring at her. And in the silence that followed I fancied I could hear a baby screaming.

"What's up, Dad?"

He didn't reply.

"There's something wrong with that baby," Doc Spencer said. "Listen."

At this point, Mrs Clipstone was about two hundred yards away from us but closing fast.

"Can you hear him now, Dad?"

"Yes, I can hear him."

"He's yelling his head off," Doc Spencer said.

The small, shrill voice in the distance was growing louder every second, frantic, piercing, non-stop.

"He's having a fit," my father said. "It's a good thing we've got a doctor handy."

Doc Spencer didn't say anything.

"That's why she's running, Doctor," my father said. "He's having a fit and she wants to get him in here quick and put him under a cold tap."

"Some noise," I said.

"If it isn't a fit," my father said, "you can bet your life it's something like it."

"I doubt it's a fit," the doctor said.

My father shifted his feet uneasily on the gravel of the driveway. "There's a thousand and one different things keep happening every day to little babies like that," he said. "That's right, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Of course," Doc Spencer said. "Every day."

"I knew a baby once who caught his fingers in the spokes of a pram wheel," my father said. "It cut them clean off."

The doctor smiled.

"Whatever it is," my father said, "I wish to heavens she'd stop running. It'll give the game away."

A long lorry loaded with bricks came up behind the pram and the driver slowed down and poked his head out of the window to stare. Mrs Clipstone ignored him and flew on. She was so close now I could see her big red face with the mouth wide open, panting for breath. I noticed she was wearing white gloves on her hands, very prim and dainty. And there was a funny little white hat to match perched right on the top of her head, like a mushroom.

Suddenly, out of the pram, straight up into the air, flew an enormous pheasant!

My father let out a cry of horror.

The fool in the lorry began roaring with laughter.

The pheasant flapped around drunkenly for a few seconds, then lost height and landed on the grass by the side of the road.

"Crikey!" Doc Spencer said. "Look at that!"

A grocer's van came up behind the lorry and began hooting to get by. Mrs Clipstone kept on running.

Then WHOOSH!—a second pheasant flew up out of the pram.

Then a third and a fourth.

"Great Scott!" Doc Spencer said. "I know what's happened!*It's the sleeping pills! They're wearing off!*"

My father didn't say a word.

Mrs Clipstone covered the last fifty yards at a tremendous pace. She came swinging into the filling-station with birds flying out of the pram in all directions.

"What on earth is happening?" she shrieked. She pulled up sharp against the first pump and seized the screaming infant in her arms and dragged him clear.

With the weight of the child suddenly lifted away, a great cloud of pheasants rose up out of the gigantic pram. There must have been well over a hundred of them, and the whole sky above us was filled with huge brown birds clapping their wings.

"A sleeping pill doesn't last forever," Doc Spencer said, shaking his head sadly. "It always wears off by the next morning."

The pheasants were too dopey to fly far. In a few seconds down they came again and settled themselves like a swarm of locusts all over the filling-station. The place was covered with them. They sat wing to wing along the roof of the workshop and about a dozen were clinging to the sill of the office window. Some had flown down on to the rack that held the bottles of lubricating oil, and others were sliding about on the bonnet of Doc Spencer's car. One cock bird with a fine tail was perched superbly on top of a petrol pump, and quite a number, those that were too drunk to do anything else, simply squatted in the driveway at our feet, fluffing their feathers and blinking their small eyes.

My father stayed remarkably calm. But not poor Mrs Clipstone. "They nearly pecked him to pieces!' she was crying, clasping the screaming baby to her bosom.

"Take him into the caravan, Mrs Clipstone," my father said. "All these birds are making him nervous. And Danny, push that pram into the workshop quick."

Mrs Clipstone disappeared into our caravan with the baby. I pushed the pram into the workshop.

Across the road a line of cars had already started forming behind the brick-lorry and the grocery van. People were opening their doors and getting out and beginning to cross over to stare at the pheasants.

"Watch out, Dad!" I said. "Look who's here!"