20

Goodbye Mr Hazell

The big shiny silver Rolls-Royce had braked suddenly and come to a stop right alongside the filling-station. Behind the wheel I could see the enormous pink beery face of Mr Victor Hazell staring at the pheasants. I could see the mouth hanging open, the eyes bulging out of his head like toadstools and the skin of his face turning from pink to bright scarlet. The car door opened and out he came, resplendent in fawn-coloured riding-breeches and high polished boots. There was a yellow silk scarf with red dots on it round his neck, and he had a sort of bowler hat on his head. The great shooting party was about to begin and he was on his way to greet the guests.

He left the door of the Rolls open and came at us like a charging bull. My father, Doc Spencer and I stood close together in a little group, waiting for him. He started shouting at us the moment he got out of the car, and he went on shouting for a long time after that. I am sure you would like to know what he said, but I cannot possibly repeat it here. The language he used was so foul and filthy it scorched my earholes. Words came out of his mouth that I had never heard before and hope never to hear again. Little flecks of white foam began forming around his lips and running down his chin on to the yellow silk scarf.

I glanced at my father. He was standing very still and very calm, waiting for the shouting to finish. The colour was back in his cheeks now and I could see the tiny twinkling wrinkles of a smile around the corners of his eyes.

Doc Spencer stood beside him and he also was very calm. He was looking at Mr Hazell rather as one would look at a slug on a leaf of lettuce in the salad.

I myself did not feel quite so calm.

"But they are *not* your pheasants," my father said at last. "They're mine."

"Don't lie to me, man!" yelled Mr Hazell. "I'm the only person round here who has pheasants!"

"They are on my land," my father said quietly. "They flew on to my land, and so long as they stay on my land they belong to me. Don't you know the rules, you bloated old blue-faced baboon?"

Doc Spencer started to giggle. Mr Hazell's skin turned from scarlet to purple. His eyes and his cheeks were bulging so much with rage it looked as though someone was blowing up his face with a pump. He glared at my father. Then he glared at the dopey pheasants swarming all over the filling-station. "What's the matter with 'em?" he shouted. "What've you done to 'em?"

At this point, pedalling grandly towards us on his black bicycle, came the arm of the law in the shape of Sergeant Enoch Samways, resplendent in his blue uniform and shiny silver buttons. It was always a mystery to me how Sergeant Samways could sniff out trouble wherever it was. Let there be a few boys fighting on the pavement or two motorists arguing over a dented bumper and you could bet your life the village policeman would be there within minutes.

We all saw him coming now, and a little hush fell upon the entire company. I imagine the same sort of thing happens when a king or a president enters a roomful of chattering people. They all stop talking and stand very still as a mark of respect for a powerful and important person.

Sergeant Samways dismounted from his bicycle and threaded his way carefully through the mass of pheasants squatting on the ground. The face behind the big black moustache showed no surprise, no anger, no emotion of any kind. It was calm and neutral, as the face of the law should always be.

For a full half-minute he allowed his eyes to travel slowly round the filling-station, gazing at the mass of pheasants squatting all over the place. The rest of us, including even Mr Hazell, waited in silence for judgment to be pronounced.

"Well, well, well," said Sergeant Samways at last, puffing out his chest and addressing nobody in particular. "What, may I hask, is 'appenin' around 'ere?" Sergeant Samways had a funny habit of sometimes putting the letter *h* in front of words that shouldn't have an *h* there at all. And as though to balance things out, he would take away the *h* from all the words that should have begun with that letter.

"I'll tell you what's happening round here!" shouted Mr Hazell, advancing upon the policeman. "These are *my pheasants*, and this rogue," pointing at my father, "has enticed them out of my woods on to his filthy little filling-station!"

"*Hen*-ticed?" said Sergeant Samways, looking first at Mr Hazell, then at us. "*Hen*-ticed them, did you say?"

"Of course he enticed them!"

"Well now," said the sergeant, propping his bicycle carefully against one of our pumps. "This is a very hinterestin' haccusation, very hinterestin' indeed, because I ain't never 'eard of nobody hen-ticin' a pheasant across six miles of fields and open countryside. 'Ow do you think this *hen*-ticin' was performed, Mr 'Azell, if I may hask?"

"Don't ask me *how* he did it because I don't know!" shouted Mr Hazell. "But he's done it all right! The proof is all around you! All my finest birds are sitting here in this dirty little filling-station when they ought to be up in my own wood getting ready for the shoot!" The words poured out of Mr Hazell's mouth like hot lava from an erupting volcano.

"Am I correct," said Sergeant Samways, "am I habsolutely haccurate in thinkin' that today is the day of your great shootin' party, Mr 'Azell?"

"That's the whole point!" cried Mr Hazell, stabbing his forefinger into the sergeant's chest as though he were punching a typewriter or an adding machine. "And if I don't get these birds back on my land quick sharp, some very important people are going to be extremely angry this morning. And one of my guests, I'll have you know, Sergeant, is none other than your own boss, the Chief Constable of the County! So you had better do something about it fast, hadn't you, unless you want to lose those sergeant's stripes of yours?"

Sergeant Samways did not like people poking their fingers in his chest, least of all Mr Hazell, and he showed it by twitching his upper lip so violently that his moustache came alive and jumped about like

some small bristly animal.

"Now just one minute," he said to Mr Hazell. "Just one minute, please. Am I to understand that you are haccusin' this gentleman 'ere of committin' this hact?"

"Of course I am!" cried Mr Hazell. "I know he did it!"

"And do you 'ave any hevidence to support this haccusation?"

"The evidence is all around you!" shouted Mr Hazell. "Are you blind or something?"

Now my father stepped forward. He took one small pace to the front and fixed Mr Hazell with his marvellous bright twinkly eyes. "Surely you know how these pheasants came here?" he said softly.

"Surely I do *not* know how they came here!" snapped Mr Hazell.

"Then I shall tell you," my father said, "because it is quite simple, really. They all knew they were going to be shot today if they stayed in your wood, so they flew in here to wait until the shooting was over."

"Rubbish!" yelled Mr Hazell.

"It's not rubbish at all," my father said. "They are extremely intelligent birds, pheasants. Isn't that so, Doctor?"

"They have tremendous brain-power," Doc Spencer said. "They know exactly what's going on."

"It would undoubtedly be a great honour," my father said, "to be shot by the Chief Constable of the County, and an even greater one to be eaten afterwards by Lord Thistlethwaite, but I do not think a pheasant would see it that way."

"You are scoundrels, both of you!" shouted Mr Hazell. "You are rapscallions of the worst kind!"

"Now then, now then," said Sergeant Samways. "Hinsults ain't goin' to get us nowhere. They only haggravate things. Therefore, gentlemen, I 'ave a suggestion to put before you. I suggest that we all of us make a big heffort to drive these birds back over the road on to Mr 'Azell's land. 'Ow does that strike you, Mr 'Azell?"

"It'll be a step in the right direction," Mr Hazell said. "Get on with it, then."

" 'Ow about you, Willum?" the sergeant said to my father. "Are you agreeable to this haction?"

"I think it's a splendid idea," my father said, giving Sergeant Samways one of his funny looks. "I'll be very glad to help. So will Danny."

What's he up to now, I wondered, because whenever my father gave somebody one of his funny looks, it meant something funny was going to happen. And Sergeant Samways, I noticed, also had quite a sparkle in his usually stern eye. "Come on, my lads!" he cried. "Let's push these lazy birds over the road!" And with that he began striding around the filling-station, waving his arms at the pheasants and shouting "Shoo!

Shoo! Off you go! Beat it! Get out of 'ere!"

My father and I joined him in this rather absurd exercise, and for the second time that morning clouds of pheasants rose up into the air, clapping their enormous wings. It was then I realised that in order to fly across the road, the birds would first have to fly over Mr Hazell's mighty Rolls-Royce which lay right in their path with its door still open. Most of the pheasants were too dopey to manage this, so down they came again smack on top of the great silver car. They were all over the roof and the bonnet, sliding and slithering and trying to keep a grip on that beautifully polished surface. I could hear their sharp claws scraping into the paintwork as they struggled to hang on, and already they were depositing their dirty droppings all over the roof.

"Get them off!" screamed Mr Hazell. "Get them away!"

"Don't you worry, Mr 'Azell, sir," Sergeant Samways cried out. "We'll fix 'em for you. Come on, boys! Heasy does it! Shoo 'em right over the road!"

"Not on my car, you idiot!" Mr Hazell bellowed, jumping up and down. "Send them the other way!"

"We will, sir, we will!" answered Sergeant Samways.

In less than a minute, the Rolls was literally festooned with pheasants, all scratching and scrabbling and making their disgusting runny messes over the shiny silver paint. What is more, I saw at least a dozen of them fly right *inside* the car through the open door by the driver's seat. Whether or not Sergeant Samways had cunningly steered them in there himself, I didn't know, but it happened so quickly that Mr Hazell never even noticed.

"Get those birds off my car!" Mr Hazell bellowed. "Can't you see they're ruining the paintwork, you madman!"

"Paintwork?" Sergeant Samways said. "What paintwork?" He had stopped chasing the pheasants now and he stood there looking at Mr Hazell and shaking his head sadly from side to side. "We've done our very best to hencourage these birds over the road," he said, "but they're too hignorant to hunderstand."

"My car, man!" shouted Mr Hazell. "Get them away from my car!"

"Ah," the sergeant said. "Your car. Yes, I see what you mean, sir. Beastly dirty birds, pheasants are. But why don't you just 'op in quick and drive 'er away fast? They'll 'ave to get off then, won't they?"

Mr Hazell, who seemed only too glad of an excuse to escape from this madhouse, made a dash for the open door of the Rolls and leaped into the driver's seat. The moment he was in, Sergeant Samways slammed the door, and suddenly there was the most infernal uproar inside the car as a dozen or more enormous pheasants started squawking and flapping all over the seats and round Mr Hazell's head. "Drive on, Mr 'Azell, sir!" shouted Sergeant Samways through the window in his most commanding policeman's voice. " 'Urry up, 'urry up, 'urry up! Get goin' quick! There's no time to lose! Hignore them pheasants, Mr 'Azell, and haccelerate that hengine!"

Mr Hazell didn't have much choice. He had to make a run for it now. He started the engine and the great Rolls shot off down the road with clouds of pheasants rising up from it in all directions.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. The pheasants that had flown up off the car *stayed up in the air*. They didn't come flapping drunkenly down as we had expected them to. They stayed up and they kept on flying. Over the top of the filling-station they flew, and over the caravan, and over the field at the back where our little outdoor lavatory stood, and over the next field, and over the crest of the hill until they disappeared from sight.

"Great Scott!" Doc Spencer cried. "Just look at that! They've recovered! The sleeping pills have worn off at last!"

Now all the other pheasants around the place were beginning to come awake. They were standing up tall on their legs and ruffling their feathers and turning their heads quickly from side to side. One or two of them started running about, then all the others started running; and when Sergeant Samways flapped his arms at them, the whole lot took off into the air and flew over the filling-station and were gone.

Suddenly, there was not a pheasant left. And it was very interesting to see that none of them had flown across the road, or even down the road in the direction of Hazell's Wood and the great shooting party. Every one of them had flown in exactly the opposite direction!

21

Doc Spencer's Surprise

Out on the main road, a line of about twenty cars and lorries was parked bumper to bumper, and the people were standing about in groups, laughing and talking about the astonishing sight they had just witnessed.

"Come along, now!" Sergeant Samways called, striding towards them. "Get goin'! Get movin'! We can't 'ave this! You're blockin' the 'ighway!"

Nobody ever disobeyed Sergeant Samways, and soon the people were drifting back to their cars and getting in. In a few minutes, they too were all gone. Only the four of us were left now—Doc Spencer, Sergeant Samways, my father and me.

"Well, Willum," Sergeant Samways said, coming back from the road to join us beside the pumps. "Them pheasants was the most hastonishin' sight I ever seen in my hentire life!"

"It was lovely," Doc Spencer said. "Just lovely. Didn't you enjoy it, Danny?"

"Marvellous," I said.

"Pity we lost them," my father said. "It very near broke my heart when they all started flying out of the pram. I knew we'd lost them then."

"But 'ow in 'eaven's name did you ever catch 'em in the first place?" asked Sergeant Samways. " 'Ow did you do it, Willum? Come on, man. Let me in on the secret."

My father told him. He kept it short, but even then it made a fine story. And all the way through it, the sergeant kept saying, "Well I never! Well, I'll be blowed! You could knock me down with a feather! Stone the crows!" and things like that. And when the story was finished, he pointed his long policeman's finger straight at my face and cried, "Well, I'll be jiggered! I never would 'ave thought a little nipper like you could come up with such a fantastical brainwave as that! Young man, I congratulate you!"

"He'll go a long way, young Danny will, you see if he doesn't," Doc Spencer said. "He'll be a great inventor one day!"

To be spoken about like that by the two men I admired most in the world, after my father, made me blush and stutter. And as I stood there wondering what on earth I was expected to say in reply, a woman's voice behind me cried out, "Well, thank goodness that's over at last!"

This, of course, was Mrs Grace Clipstone, who was now picking her way cautiously down the caravan steps with young Christopher in her arms. "Never in my life," she was saying, "have I seen such a shambles as that!"

The little white hat was still perched on the top of her head, and the prim white gloves were still on her hands. "What a gathering!" she said, advancing towards us. "What a gathering we have here of rogues and varmints! Good morning, Enoch."

"Good morning to you, Mrs Clipstone," Sergeant Samways said.

"How's the baby?" my father asked her.

"The baby is better, thank you, William," she said. "Though I doubt he'll ever be quite the same again."

"Of course he will," Doc Spencer said. "Babies are tough."

"I don't care how tough they are!" she answered. "How would *you* like it if you were being taken for a nice quiet walk in your pram on a pretty autumn morning . . . and you were sitting on a lovely soft mattress . . . and suddenly the mattress comes alive and starts bouncing you up and down like a stormy sea . . . and the next thing you know, there's about a hundred sharp curvy beaks poking up from underneath the mattress and pecking you to pieces!"

The doctor cocked his head over to one side, then to the other, and he smiled at Mrs Clipstone.

"You think it's funny?" she cried. "Well just you wait, Doctor Spencer, and one night I'll put a few snakes or crocodiles or something under *your* mattress and see how you like it!"

Sergeant Samways was fetching his bicycle from beside the pumps. "Well, ladies and gents," he said. "I must be off and see who else is gettin' into mischief round 'ere."

"I am truly sorry you were troubled, Enoch," my father said. "And thanks very much indeed for the help."

"I wouldn't 'ave missed this one for all the tea in China," Sergeant Samways said. "But it did sadden me most terrible, Willum, to see all those lovely birds go slippin' right through our fingers like that. Because to my mind, there don't hexist a more luscious dish than roasted pheasant anywhere on this earth."

"It's going to sadden the vicar a lot more than it saddens you!" said Mrs Clipstone. "That's all he's been talking about ever since he got out of bed this morning, the lovely roast pheasant he's going to have for his dinner tonight!"

"He'll get over it," Doc Spencer said.

"He will not get over it and it's a rotten shame!" Mrs Clipstone said. "Because now all I've got to give him are some awful frozen fillets of cod, and he never did like cod anyway."

"But," my father said, "surely you didn't load *all* those pheasants into the pram, did you? You were meant to keep at least a dozen for you and the vicar!"

"Oh, I know that," she wailed. "But I was so tickled at the thought of strolling calmly through the village with Christopher sitting on a hundred and twenty birds, I simply forgot to keep any back for ourselves. And now, alas, they're all gone! And so is the vicar's supper!"

The doctor went over to Mrs Clipstone and took her by the arm. "You come with me, Grace," he said. "I've got something to show you." He led her across to my father's workshop where the big doors stood wide open.

The rest of us stayed where we were and waited.

"Good grief! Come and look at this!" Mrs Clipstone called from inside the workshop. "William! Enoch! Danny! Come and look!"

We hurried over and entered the workshop.

It was a great sight.

Laid out on my father's bench amid the spanners and wrenches and oily rags were six magnificent pheasants, three cocks and three hens.

"There we are, ladies and gentlemen," said the doctor, his small wrinkled face beaming with delight. "How's that?"

We were speechless.

"Two for you, Grace, to keep the vicar in a good mood," Doc Spencer said. "Two for Enoch for all the fine work he did this morning. And two for William and Danny who deserve them most of all."

"What about you, Doctor?" my father asked. "That doesn't leave any for you."

"My wife has enough to do without plucking pheasants all day long," he said. "And anyway, who got them out of the wood in the first place? You and Danny."

"But how on earth did *you* get them?" my father asked him. "When did you nab them?"

"I didn't nab them," the doctor said. "I had a hunch."

"What sort of a hunch?" my father asked.

"It seemed fairly obvious," the doctor said, "that *some* of those pheasants must have gobbled up more than one raisin each. Some, if they were quick enough, might have swallowed half a dozen each, or even more. In which case they would have received a very heavy overdose of sleeping pills and wouldn't *ever* wake up."

"Ah-ha!" we cried. "Of course! Of course!"

"So while you were all so busy driving the birds on to old Hazell's Rolls-Royce, I sneaked in here and had a look under the sheet in the bottom of the pram. And there they were!"

"Hamazin'!" said Sergeant Samways. "Habsolutely hamazin'!"

"Those were the greedy ones," the doctor said. "It never pays to eat more than your fair share."

"Marvellous!" my father said. "Well done, sir!"

"Oh, you lovely man!" cried Mrs Clipstone, flinging an arm round the tiny doctor and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Now come along," the doctor said to her. "I'll drive you home. You can leave this crazy perambulator where it is. And Enoch, we'll take your birds with us and drop them off at your house on the way. We can't have the arm of the law cycling through the village with a brace of pheasants slung over the handle-bars."

"I am very much hobliged to you, Doctor," Sergeant Samways said. "I really am."

My father and I loaded four of the pheasants into the doctor's car. Mrs Clipstone got into the front seat with the baby and the doctor sat himself behind the wheel. "Don't be sad, William," he said to my father through the window as he drove off. "It was a famous victory."

Then Sergeant Samways mounted his bicycle and waved us goodbye and pedalled away down the road in the direction of the village. He pedalled slowly, and there was a certain majesty in the way he held himself, with the head high and the back very straight, as though he were riding a fine thoroughbred mare instead of an old black bike.

It was all over now. My father and I stood alone just outside the workshop and suddenly the old place seemed to become very quiet.

"Well, Danny," my father said, looking at me with those twinkly eyes of his. "That's that."

"It was fun, Dad."

"I know it was," he said.

"I really loved it," I said.

"So did I, Danny."

He placed one hand on my shoulder and we began walking slowly towards the caravan.

"Maybe we should lock the pumps and take a holiday for the rest of the day," he said.

"You mean not open up at all?"

"Why should we?" he said. "After all, it's Saturday, isn't it?"

"But we always stay open on Saturdays, Dad. And Sundays."

"Maybe it's time we didn't," he said. "We could do something else instead. Something more interesting."

I waited, wondering what was coming next.

When we reached the caravan, my father climbed the steps and sat down on the little outside platform. He allowed both his legs, the plaster one and the good one, to dangle over the edge. I climbed up and sat down beside him with my feet on the steps of the ladder.

It was a fine place to sit, the platform of the caravan. It was such a quiet comfortable place to sit and talk and do nothing in pleasant weather. People with houses have a front porch or a terrace instead, with big chairs to lounge in, but I wouldn't have traded either of those for our wooden platform.

"I know a place about three miles away," my father was saying, "over Cobblers Hill and down the other side, where there's a small wood of larch trees. It is a very quiet place and the stream runs right through it."

"The stream?" I said.

He nodded and gave me another of his twinkly looks. "It's full of trout," he said.

"Oh, *could we*?" I cried. "Could we go there, Dad?"

"Why not?" he said. "We could try tickling them the way Doc Spencer told us."

"Will you teach me?" I said.

"I haven't had much practice with trout," he told me. "Pheasants are more in my line. But we could always learn."

"Can we go now?" I asked, getting excited all over again.

"I thought we would just pop into the village first and buy the electric oven," he said. "You haven't forgotten about the electric oven, have you?"

"But Dad," I said. "That was when we thought we were going to have lots and lots of pheasants to roast."

"We've still got the two the Doc gave us," he said. "And with any luck we'll have lots more of them as the weeks go by. It's time we had an oven anyway, then we can roast things properly instead of heating up baked beans in a saucepan. We could have roasted pork one day and then if we felt like it we could have roasted leg of lamb the next time or even roasted beef. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course I would. And Dad, would you be able to make your favourite thing of all?"

"What's that?" he asked.

"Toad-in-the-hole," I said.

"By golly!" he cried. "That'll be the very first thing we'll make in our new oven! Toad-in-the-hole! I'll make it in an enormous pan, the same as my old mum, with the Yorkshire pudding very crisp and raised up in huge bubbly mountains and the sausages nestling in between the mountains!"

"Can we get it today, Dad? Will they deliver it at once?"

"They might, Danny. We'll have to see."

"Couldn't we order it now on the telephone?"

"We mustn't do that," my father said. "We must go personally to see Mr Wheeler and we must inspect all the different models with great care."

"All right," I said. "Let's go." I was really steamed up now about getting an oven and being able to have Toad-in-the-hole and roasted pork and stuff like that. I couldn't wait.

My father got to his feet. "And when we've done that," he said, "we'll go off to the stream and see if we can't find us some big rainbow trout. We could take sandwiches with us for lunch and eat them beside the stream. That will make a good day of it."

A few minutes later, the two of us were walking down the well-known road towards the village to buy the oven. My father's iron foot went *clink clink* on the hard surface and overhead some big black thunderclouds were moving slowly down the valley.

"Dad," I said.

"Yes, my love?"

"When we have our roasted pheasant supper with our new oven, do you think we could invite Doctor Spencer and Mrs Spencer to eat it with us?"

"Great heavens!" my father cried. "What a wonderful thought! What a beautiful idea! We'll give a dinner-party in their honour!"

"The only thing is," I said, "will there be enough room in the caravan for four people?"

"I think so," he said. "Just."

"But we've only got two chairs."

"That's no problem, Danny. You and I can sit on boxes." There was a short silence, then he said, "But I'll tell you what we must have and that's a table-cloth. We can't serve dinner to the doctor and his wife without a table-cloth."

"But we don't have a table-cloth, Dad."

"Don't you worry about it," my father said. "We can use a sheet from one of the bunks. That's all a table-cloth is, a sort of sheet."

"What about knives and forks?" I asked.

"How many do we have?"

"Just two knives," I said, "and two forks. And those are all a bit dented."

"We shall buy two more of each," my father said. "We shall give our guests the new ones and use the old ones ourselves."

"Good," I said. "Lovely." I reached out and slid my hand into his. He folded his long fingers round my fist and held it tight, and we walked on towards the village where soon the two of us would be inspecting all the different ovens with great care and talking to Mr Wheeler personally about them.

And after that, we would walk home again and make up some sandwiches for our lunch.

And after that we would set off with the sandwiches in our pockets, striding up over Cobblers Hill and down the other side to the small wood of larch trees with the stream running through it.

And after that?

Perhaps a big rainbow trout.

And after that?

There would be something else after that.

And after that?

Ah yes, and something else again.

Because what I am trying to tell you . . .

What I have been trying so hard to tell you all along is simply that my father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had.

A MESSAGE

to Children Who Have Read This Book

When you grow up

and have children of your own

do please remember something important

a stodgy parent is *no fun at all*

What a child wants

and deserves

is a parent who is

SPARKY