

“*Sticky Hat*,” he said. “I’m very fond of *Sticky Hat*.”

“When will you be back?”

“About ten o’clock,” he said. “Ten-thirty at the latest. I promise I’ll be back by ten-thirty. You’re quite sure you don’t mind being left alone?”

“Quite sure,” I said. “But you will be all right, won’t you, Dad?”

“Don’t you worry about me,” he said, putting his arm round my shoulders and giving me a hug.

“But you said there wasn’t a man in your dad’s village that didn’t get a bit shot up by the keepers sooner or later.”

“Ah,” my father said. “Yes. I did say that, didn’t I? But in those days there were lots more keepers up in the woods than there are now. There were keepers behind almost every tree.”

“How many are there now in Hazell’s Wood?”

“Not too many,” he said. “Not too many at all.”

As the day wore on, I could see my father getting more and more impatient and excited. By five o’clock we had finished work on the Baby Austin and together we ran her up and down the road to test her out.

At five-thirty we had an early supper of sausages and bacon, but my father hardly ate anything at all.

At six o’clock precisely he kissed me goodbye and said, “Promise not to wait up for me, Danny. Put yourself to bed at eight and go to sleep. Right?”

He set off down the road and I stood on the platform of the caravan, watching him go. I loved the way he moved. He had that long loping stride all countrymen have who are used to covering great distances on foot. He was wearing an old navy-blue sweater and an even older cap on his head. He turned and waved to me. I waved back. Then he disappeared round a bend in the road.

The Baby Austin

Inside the caravan I stood on a chair and lit the oil lamp in the ceiling. I had some weekend homework to do and this was as good a time as any to do it. I laid my books out on the table and sat down. But I found it impossible to keep my mind on my work.

The clock said half-past seven. This was the twilight time. He would be there now. I pictured him in his

old navy-blue sweater and peaked cap walking soft-footed up the track towards the wood. He told me he wore the sweater because navy-blue hardly showed up at all in the dark. Black was even better, he said. But he didn't have a black one and navy-blue was next best. The peaked cap was important too, he explained, because the peak cast a shadow over one's face. Just about now he would be wriggling through the hedge and entering the wood. Inside the wood I could see him treading carefully over the leafy ground, stopping, listening, going on again, and all the time searching and searching for the keeper who would somewhere be standing still as a post beside a big tree with a gun under his arm. Keepers hardly move at all when they are in a wood watching for poachers, he had told me. They stand dead still right up against the trunk of a tree and it's not easy to spot a motionless man in that position at twilight when the shadows are as dark as a wolf's mouth.

I closed my books. It was no good trying to work. I decided to go to bed instead. I undressed and put on my pyjamas and climbed into my bunk. I left the lamp burning. Soon I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, the oil-lamp was still glowing and the clock on the wall said ten minutes past two.

Ten minutes past two!

I jumped out of my bunk and looked into the bunk above mine. It was empty.

He had promised he would be home by ten-thirty at the latest, and he never broke promises.

He was nearly four hours overdue!

At that moment, a frightful sense of doom came over me. Something really had happened to him this time. I felt quite certain of it.

Hold it, I told myself. Don't get panicky. Last week you got all panicky and you made a bit of a fool of yourself.

Yes, but last week was a different thing altogether. He had made no promises to me last week. This time he had said, "I promise I'll be back by ten-thirty." Those were his exact words. And he never, absolutely never, broke a promise.

I looked again at the clock. He had left the caravan at six, which meant *he had been gone over eight hours!*

It took me two seconds to decide what I should do.

Very quickly I stripped off my pyjamas and put on my shirt and my jeans. Perhaps the keepers had shot him up so badly he couldn't walk. I pulled my sweater over my head. It was neither navy-blue nor black. It was a sort of pale brown. It would have to do. Perhaps he was lying in the wood bleeding to death. My sneakers were the wrong colour too. They were white. But they were also dirty and that took a lot of the whiteness away. How long would it take me to get to the wood? An hour and a half. Less if I ran most of the way, but not much less. As I bent down to tie the laces, I noticed my hands were shaking. And my stomach had that awful prickly feeling as though it were full of small needles.

I ran down the steps of the caravan and across to the workshop to get the torch. A torch is a good companion when you are alone outdoors at night and I wanted it with me. I grabbed the torch and went out of the workshop. I paused for a moment beside the pumps. The moon had long since disappeared but the sky was clear and a great mass of stars was wheeling above my head. There was no wind at all, no sound of any kind. To my right, going away into the blackness of the countryside, lay the lonely road that led to the dangerous wood.

Six-and-a-half miles.

Thank heavens I knew the way.

But it was going to be a long hard slog. I must try to keep a good steady pace and not run myself to a standstill in the first mile.

At that point a wild and marvellous idea came to me.

Why shouldn't I go in the Baby Austin? I really did know how to drive. My father had always allowed me to move the cars around when they came in for repair. He let me drive them into the workshop and back them out again afterwards. And sometimes I drove one of them slowly around the pumps in first gear. I loved doing it. And I would get there much much quicker if I went by car. This was an emergency. If he was wounded and bleeding badly, then every minute counted. I had never driven on the road, but I would surely not meet any other cars at this time of night. I would go very slowly and keep close in to the hedge on the proper side.

I went back to the workshop and switched on the light. I opened the double doors. I got into the driver's seat of the Baby Austin. I turned on the ignition key. I pulled out the choke. I found the starter-button and pressed it. The motor coughed once, then started.

Now for the lights. There was a pointed switch on the dash-board and I turned it to S for sidelights only. The sidelights came on. I felt for the clutch pedal with my toe. I was just able to reach it, but I had to point my toe if I wanted to press it all the way down. I pressed it down. Then I slipped the gear-lever into reverse. Slowly I backed the car out of the workshop.

I left her ticking over and went back to switch off the workshop light. It was better to keep everything looking as normal as possible. The filling-station was in darkness now except for a dim light coming from the caravan where the little oil-lamp was still burning. I decided to leave that on.

I got back into the car. I closed the door. The sidelights were so dim I hardly knew they were there. I switched on the headlamps. That was better. I searched for the dipper with my foot. I found it. I tried it and it worked. I put the headlamps on full. If I met another car, I must remember to dip them, although actually they weren't bright enough to dazzle a cockroach. They didn't give any more light than a couple of good torches.

I pressed down the clutch pedal again and pushed the gear-lever into first. This was it. My heart was thumping away so fiercely I could hear it in my throat. Ten yards away lay the main road. It was as dark as doomsday. I released the clutch very slowly. At the same time, I pressed down just a fraction of an inch on the accelerator with my right toe, and stealthily, oh most wonderfully, the little car began to lean forward and steal into motion. I pressed a shade harder on the accelerator. We crept out of the filling-

station on to the dark deserted road.

I will not pretend I wasn't petrified. I was. But mixed in with the awful fear was a glorious feeling of excitement. Most of the really exciting things we do in our lives scare us to death. They wouldn't be exciting if they didn't. I sat very stiff and upright in my seat, gripping the steering-wheel tight with both hands. My eyes were about level with the top of the steering-wheel. I could have done with a cushion to raise me up higher, but it was too late for that.

The road seemed awfully narrow in the dark. I knew there was room enough for two cars to pass each other. I had seen them from the filling-station doing it a million times. But it didn't look that way to me from where I was. At any moment something with blazing headlamps might come roaring towards me at sixty miles an hour, a heavy lorry or one of those big long-distance buses that travel through the night full of passengers. Was I too much in the middle of the road? Yes, I was. But I didn't want to pull in closer for fear of hitting the bank. If I hit the bank and bust the front axle, then all would be lost and I would never get my father home.

The motor was beginning to rattle and shake. I was still in first gear. It was vital to change up into second otherwise the engine would get too hot. I knew how the change was done but I had never actually tried doing it. Around the filling-station I had always stayed in first gear.

Well, here goes.

I eased my foot off the accelerator. I pressed the clutch down and held it there. I found the gear-lever and pulled it straight back, from first into second. I released the clutch and pressed on the accelerator. The little car leaped forward as though it had been stung. We were in second gear.

What speed were we going? I glanced at the speedometer. It was lit up very faintly, but I was able to read it. It said fifteen miles an hour. Good. That was quite fast enough. I would stay in second gear. I started figuring out how long it would take me to do six miles travelling at fifteen miles an hour.

At sixty miles an hour, six miles would take six minutes.

At thirty, it would take twice as long, twelve minutes.

At fifteen, it would take twice as long again, twenty-four minutes.

I kept going. I knew every bit of the road, every curve and every little rise and dip. Once a fox flashed out of the hedge in front of me and ran across the road with his long bushy tail streaming out behind him. I saw him clearly in the glow of my headlamps. His fur was red-brown and he had a white muzzle. It was a thrilling sight. I began to worry about the motor. I knew very well it would be certain to overheat if I drove for long in either first or second gear. I was in second. I must now change up into third. I took a deep breath and grasped the gear-lever again. Foot off the accelerator. Clutch in. Gear-lever up and across and up again. Clutch out. I had done it! I pressed down on the accelerator. The speedometer crept up to thirty. I gripped the wheel very tight with both hands and stayed in the middle of the road. At this rate I would soon be there.

Hazell's Wood was not on the main road. To reach it you had to turn left through a gap in the hedge and go uphill over a bumpy track for about a quarter of a mile. If the ground had been wet, there would have

been no hope of getting there in a car. But there hadn't been any rain for a week and the ground would surely be hard and dry. I figured I must be getting pretty close to the turning place now. I must watch out for it carefully. It would be easy to miss it. There was no gate or anything else to indicate where it was. It was simply a small gap in the hedge just wide enough to allow farm tractors to go through.

Suddenly, far ahead of me, just below the rim of the night sky, I saw a splash of yellow light. I watched it, trembling. This was something I had been dreading all along. Very quickly the light got brighter and brighter, and nearer and nearer, and in a few seconds it took shape and became the long white beam of headlamps from a car rushing towards me.

My turning place must be very close now. I was desperate to reach it and swing off the road before that monster reached me. I pressed my foot hard down for more speed. The little engine roared. The speedometer needle went from thirty to thirty-five and then to forty. But the other car was closing fast. Its headlamps were like two dazzling white eyes. They grew bigger and bigger and suddenly the whole road in front of me was lit up as clear as daylight, and *SWISH!* the thing went past me like a bullet. It was so close I felt the wind of it through my open window. And in that tiny fraction of a second when the two of us were alongside one another, I caught a glimpse of its white-painted body and I knew it was the police.

I didn't dare look round to see if they were stopping and coming back after me. I was certain they would stop. Any policeman in the world would stop if he suddenly passed a small boy in a tiny car chugging along a lonely road at half-past two in the morning. My only thought was to get away, to escape, to vanish, though heaven knows how I was going to do that. I pressed my foot harder still on the accelerator. Then all at once I saw in my own dim headlamps the tiny gap in the hedge on my left-hand side. There wasn't time to brake or slow down, so I just yanked the wheel hard over and prayed. The little car swerved violently off the road, leaped through the gap, hit the rising ground, bounced high in the air, then skidded round sideways behind the hedge and stopped.

The first thing I did was to switch off all my lights. I am not quite sure what made me do this except that I knew I must hide and I knew that if you are hiding from someone in the dark you don't shine lights all over the place to show where you are. I sat very still in my dark car. The hedge was a thick one and I couldn't see through it. The car had bounced and skidded sideways in such a way that it was now right off the track. It was behind the hedge and in a sort of field. It was facing back towards the filling-station, tucked in very close to the hedge. I could hear the police car. It had pulled up about fifty yards down the road, and now it was backing and turning. The road was far too narrow for it to turn round in one go. Then the roar from the motor got louder and he came back fast with engine revving and headlamps blazing. He flashed past the place where I was hiding and raced away into the night.

That meant the policeman had not seen me swing off the road.

But he was certain to come back again looking for me. And if he came back slowly enough he would probably see the gap. He would stop and get out of his car. He would walk through the gap and look behind the hedge, and then . . . then his torch would shine in my face and he would say, "What's going on, sonny? What's the big idea? Where do you think you're going? Whose car is this? Where do you live? Where are your parents?" He would make me go with him to the police-station, and in the end they would get the whole story out of me, and my father would be ruined.

I sat quiet as a mouse and waited. I waited for a long time. Then I heard the sound of the motor coming back again in my direction. It was making a terrific noise. He was going flat out. He whizzed past me like

a rocket. The way he was gunning that motor told me he was a very angry man. He must have been a very puzzled man, too. Perhaps he was thinking he had seen a ghost. A ghost boy driving a ghost car.

I waited to see if he would come back again.

He didn't come.

I switched on my lights.

I pressed the starter. She started at once.

But what about the wheels and the chassis? I felt sure something must have got broken when she jumped off the road on to the cart-track.

I put her into gear and very gently began to ease her forward. I listened carefully for horrid noises. There were none. I managed to get her off the grass and back on to the track.

I drove very slowly now. The track was extremely rough and rutted, and the slope was pretty steep. The little car bounced and bumped all over the place, but she kept going. Then at last, ahead of me and over to the right, looking like some gigantic black creature crouching on the crest of the hill, I saw Hazell's Wood.

Soon I was there. Immense trees rose up towards the sky all along the right-hand side of the track. I stopped the car. I switched off the motor and the lights. I got out, taking the torch with me.

There was the usual hedge dividing the wood from the track. I squeezed my way through it and suddenly I was right inside the wood. When I looked up the trees had closed in above my head like a prison roof and I couldn't see the smallest patch of sky or a single star. I couldn't see anything at all. The darkness was so solid around me I could almost touch it.

"Dad!" I called out. "Dad, are you there?"

My small high voice echoed through the forest and faded away. I listened for an answer, but none came.

I cannot possibly describe to you what it felt like to be standing alone in the pitchy blackness of that silent wood in the small hours of the night. The sense of loneliness was overwhelming, the silence was as deep as death, and the only sounds were the ones I made myself. I tried to keep absolutely still for as long as possible to see if I could hear anything at all. I listened and listened. I held my breath and listened again. I had a queer feeling that the whole wood was listening with me, the trees and the bushes, the little animals

hiding in the undergrowth and the birds roosting in the branches. All were listening. Even the silence was listening. Silence was listening to silence.

I switched on the torch. A brilliant beam of light reached out ahead of me like a long white arm. That was better. Now at any rate I could see where I was going.

The keepers would also see. But I didn't care about the keepers any more. The only person I cared about was my father. I wanted him back.

I kept the torch on and went deeper into the wood.

"Dad!" I shouted. "Dad! It's Danny! Are you there?"

I didn't know which direction I was going in. I just went on walking and calling out, walking and calling; and each time I called, I would stop and listen. But no answer came.

After a time, my voice began to go all trembly. I started to say silly things like, "Oh Dad, please tell me where you are! Please answer me! Please, oh please . . ." And I knew that if I wasn't careful, the sheer hopelessness of it all would get the better of me and I would simply give up and lie down under the trees.

"Are you there, Dad? Are you there?" I shouted. "It's Danny!"

I stood still, listening, listening, listening, and in the silence that followed, I heard or thought I heard the faint, but oh so faint, sound of a human voice.

I froze and kept listening.

Yes, there it was again.

I ran towards the sound. "Dad!" I shouted. "It's Danny! Where are you?"

I stopped again and listened.

This time the answer came just loud enough for me to hear the words. "I'm here!" the voice called out. "Over here!"

It was him!

I was so excited my legs began to get all shaky.

"Where are you, Danny?" my father called out.

"I'm here, Dad! I'm coming."

With the beam of the torch shining ahead of me, I ran towards the voice. The trees were bigger here and spaced farther apart. The ground was a carpet of brown leaves from last year and was good to run on. I didn't call out any more after that. I simply dashed ahead.

And all at once, his voice was right in front of me. "Stop, Danny, stop!" he shouted.

I stopped dead. I shone the torch over the ground. I couldn't see him.

"Where are you, Dad?"

"I'm down here. Come forward slowly. But be careful. Don't fall in."

I crept forward. Then I saw the pit. I went to the edge of it and shone the light downward and there was my father. He was sitting on the floor of the pit and he looked up into the light and said, "Hello, my marvellous darling. Thank you for coming."

"Are you all right, Dad?"

"My ankle seems to be broken," he said. "It happened when I fell in."

The pit had been dug in the shape of a square, with each side about six feet long. But it was the depth of it that was so awful. It was at least twelve feet deep. The sides had been cut straight down into the earth, presumably with a mechanical shovel, and no man could have climbed out of it without help.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "It hurts a lot. But don't worry about that. The point is, *I've got to get out of here before morning*. The keepers know I'm here and they're coming back for me as soon as it gets light."

"Did they dig the hole to catch people?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

I shone my light around the top of the pit and saw how the keepers had covered it over with sticks and leaves and how the whole thing had collapsed when my father stepped on it. It was the kind of trap hunters in Africa dig to catch wild animals.

"Do the keepers know who you are?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Two of them came and shone a light down on me but I covered my face with my arms and they couldn't recognise me. I heard them trying to guess. They were guessing all sorts of names but they didn't mention mine. Then one of them shouted, 'We'll find out who you are all right in the morning, my lad. And guess who's coming with us to fish you out?' I didn't answer. I didn't want them to hear my voice. 'We'll tell you who's coming,' he said. 'Mr Victor Hazell himself is coming with us to say hello to you!' And the other one said, 'Boy, I hate to think what he's going to do when he gets his hands on you!' They both laughed and then they went away. Ouch! My poor ankle!"

"Have the keepers gone, Dad?"

"Yes," he said. "They've gone for the night."

I was kneeling on the edge of the pit. I wanted so badly to go down and comfort him, but that would have been madness.

"What time is it?" he said. "Shine the light down so I can see." I did as he asked. "It's ten to three," he

said. "I must be out of here before sunrise."

"Dad," I said.

"Yes?"

"I brought the car. I came in the Baby Austin."

"You *what*?" he cried.

"I wanted to get here quickly so I just drove it out of the workshop and came straight here."

He sat there staring at me. I kept the torch pointed to one side of him so as not to dazzle his eyes.

"You mean you actually drove here in the Baby Austin?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy," he said. "You're absolutely plumb crazy."

"It wasn't difficult," I said.

"You could have been killed," he said. "If anything had hit you in that little thing, you'd have been smashed to smithereens."

"It went fine, Dad."

"Where is it now?"

"Just outside the wood on the bumpy track."

His face was all puckered up with pain and as white as a sheet of paper. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm fine." He was shivering all over though it was a warm night.

"If we could get you out, I'm sure I could help you to the car," I said. "You could lean on me and hop on one leg."

"I'll never get out of here without a ladder," he said.

"Wouldn't a rope do?" I asked.

"A rope!" he said. "Yes, of course! A rope would do it! There's one in the Baby Austin! It's under the back seat! Mr Pratchett always carries a tow-rope in case of a breakdown."

"I'll get it," I said. "Wait there, Dad."

I left him and ran back the way I had come, shining the torch ahead of me. I found the car. I lifted up the back seat. The tow-rope was there, tangled up with the jack and the wheel-brace. I got it out and slung it over my shoulder. I wriggled through the hedge and ran back into the wood.

“Where are you, Dad?” I called out.

“Over here,” he answered.

With his voice to guide me, I had no trouble finding him this time. “I’ve got the rope,” I said.

“Good. Now tie one end of it to the nearest tree.”

Using the torch all the time, I tied one end of the rope round the nearest tree. I lowered the other end down to my father in the pit. He grasped it with both hands and hauled himself up into a standing position. He stood only on his right leg. He kept his left foot off the ground by bending his knee.

“Jeepers,” he said. “This hurts.”

“Do you think you can make it, Dad?”

“I’ve got to make it,” he said. “Is the rope tied properly?”

“Yes.”

I lay on my stomach with my hands dangling down into the pit. I wanted to help pull him up as soon as he came within reach. I kept the torch on him all the time.

“I’ve got to climb this with hands only,” he said.

“You can do it,” I told him.

I saw his knuckles tighten as he gripped the rope. Then he came up, hand over hand, and as soon as he was within reach I got hold of one of his arms and pulled for all I was worth. He came over the top edge of the pit sliding on his chest and stomach, him pulling on the rope and me pulling on his arm. He lay on the ground, breathing fast and loud.

“You’ve done it!” I said.

“Let me rest a moment.”

I waited, kneeling beside him.

“All right,” he said. “Now for the next bit. Give me a hand, Danny. You’ll have to do most of the work from now on.”

I helped him to keep his balance as he got up on to his one good foot. “Which side do you want me on?” I asked.

“On my right,” he said. “Otherwise you’ll keep knocking against my bad ankle.”

I moved up close to his right side and he put both his hands on my shoulders.

“Go on, Dad,” I said. “You can lean harder than that.”

“Shine the light forward so we can see where we’re going,” he said.

I did as he asked.

He tried a couple of hops on his right foot.

“All right?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Holding his left foot just clear of the ground and leaning on me with both hands, he began to hop forward on one leg. I shuffled along beside him, trying to go at exactly the speed he wanted.

“Say when you want a rest.”

“Now,” he said. We stopped. “I’ve got to sit down,” he said. I helped him to lower himself to the ground. His left foot dangled helplessly on its broken ankle, and every time it touched the ground he jumped with pain. I sat beside him on the brown leaves that covered the floor of the wood. The sweat was pouring down his face.

“Does it hurt terribly, Dad?”

“It does when I hop,” he said. “Each time I hop, it jars it.”

He sat on the ground resting for several minutes.

“Let’s try again,” he said.

I helped him up and off we went. This time I put an arm round his waist to give him extra support. He put his right arm round my shoulders and leaned on me hard. It went better that way. But boy, was he heavy. My legs kept bending and buckling with each hop.

Hop . . .

Hop . . .

Hop . . .

“Keep going,” he gasped. “Come on. We can make it.”

“There’s the hedge,” I said, waving the torch. “We’re nearly there.”

Hop . . .

Hop . . .

Hop . . .

When we reached the hedge, my legs gave way and we both crashed to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s O.K. Can you help me get through the hedge?”

I’m not quite sure how he and I got through that hedge. He crawled a bit and I pulled a bit, and little by little we squeezed through and out the other side on to the track. The tiny car was only ten yards away.

We sat on the grassy bank under the hedge to get a breather. His watch said it was nearly four o’clock in the morning. The sun would not be up for another two hours, so we had plenty of time.

“Shall I drive?” I asked.

“You’ll have to,” he said. “I’ve only got one foot.”

I helped him to hop over to the car, and after a bit of a struggle he managed to get in. His left leg was doubled up underneath his right leg and the whole thing must have been agony for him. I got into the driver’s seat beside him.

“The rope,” I said. “We left it behind.”

“Forget it,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

I started the motor and switched on the headlamps. I backed the car and turned it round and soon we were heading downhill on the bumpy track.

“Go slowly, Danny,” my father said. “It hurts like crazy over the bumps.” He had one hand on the wheel, helping to guide the car.

We reached the bottom of the track and turned on to the road.

“You’re doing fine,” he said. “Keep going.”

Now that we were on the main road, I changed into second gear.

“Rev her up and go into third,” he said. “Do you want me to help you?”

“I think I can do it,” I said.

I changed into third gear.

With my father’s hand on the wheel I had no fear of hitting the hedge or anything else, so I pressed down hard on the accelerator. The speedometer needle crept up to forty.

Something big with headlamps blazing came rushing towards us. “I’ll take the wheel,” my father said. “Let go of it completely.” He kept the little car close in to the side of the road as a huge milk-lorry rushed past us. That was the only thing we met on the way home.

As we approached the filling-station my father said, “I’ll have to go to hospital for this. It must be set properly and then put into plaster.”

“How long will you be in hospital?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be home before evening.”

“Will you be able to walk?”

“Yes. They fix a metal thing into the plaster. It sticks out underneath the foot. I’ll be able to walk on that.”

“Should we go to the hospital now?”

“No,” he said. “I’ll just lie down on the floor of the workshop and wait till it’s time to call Doc Spencer. He’ll arrange everything.”

“Call him now,” I said.

“No. I don’t like waking doctors up at four-thirty in the morning. We’ll call him at seven.”

“What will you tell him, Dad? I mean about how it happened?”

“I’ll tell him the truth,” my father said. “Doc Spencer is my friend.”

We pulled into the filling-station and I parked the car right up against the workshop doors. I helped my father to get out. Then I held him round the waist as he hop-hopped the short distance into the workshop.

Inside the workshop, he leaned against the tool-bench for support and told me what to do next.

First, I spread some sheets of newspaper out over the oily floor. Then I ran to the caravan and fetched two blankets and a pillow. I laid one blanket on the floor over the newspaper. I helped my father to lie down on the blanket. Then I put the pillow under his head and covered him up with the second blanket.

“Put the phone down here so I can reach it,” he said.

I did as he asked.

“Can I get you anything, Dad? What about a hot drink?”

“No, thank you,” he said. “I mustn’t have a thing. I’m going to have an anaesthetic soon, and you mustn’t eat or drink anything at all before that. But *you* have something. Go and make yourself some breakfast. Then go to bed.”

“I’d like to wait here till the doctor comes,” I said.

“You must be dead tired, Danny.”

“I’m all right,” I said.

I found an old wooden chair and pulled it up near him and sat down.

He closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing off.

My own eyes kept closing, too. I couldn't keep them open.

"I'm sorry about the mess I made of it all," I heard him saying.

I must have gone to sleep after that because the next thing I heard was Doc Spencer's voice saying to my father, "Well, my goodness me, William, what on earth have you been up to?"

I opened my eyes and saw the doctor bending down over my father, who was still lying on the floor of the workshop.

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Doc Spencer

My father once told me that Doc Spencer had been looking after the people of our district for nearly forty-five years. He was over seventy now and could have retired long ago, but he didn't want to retire and his patients didn't want him to either. He was a tiny man with tiny hands and feet and a tiny round face. The face was as brown and wrinkled as a shrivelled apple. He was some sort of an elf, I used to think to myself each time I saw him, a very ancient sort of an elf with wispy white hair and steel-rimmed spectacles; a quick clever little elf with a swift eye and a flashing smile and a fast way of talking. Nobody feared him. Many people loved him, and he was especially gentle with children.

"Which ankle?" he asked.

"The left one," my father said.

Doc Spencer knelt on the floor and took from his bag a pair of large scissors. Then to my astonishment he proceeded to slit the cloth of my father's left trouser-leg right up to the knee. He parted the cloth and looked at the ankle but he didn't touch it. I looked at it too. The foot seemed to be bent round sideways and there was a huge swelling below the ankle-bone.

"That's a nasty one," Doc Spencer said. "We'd better get you into hospital right away. May I use your phone?"

He called the hospital and asked for an ambulance. Then he spoke to someone else about taking X-rays and doing an operation.

"How's the pain?" Doc Spencer asked. "Would you like me to give you something?"

"No," my father said. "I'll wait till I get there."

"As you wish, William. But how on earth did you do it? Did you fall down the steps of that crazy