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.

9

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

caravan?"

"Not exactly," my father said. "No."

The doctor waited for him to go on. So did I.

"As a matter of fact," he said slowly, "I was mooching around up in Hazell's Wood . . ." He paused again and looked at the doctor who was still kneeling beside him.

"Ah," the doctor said. "Yes, I see. And what's it like up there these days? Plenty of pheasants?"

"Stacks of them," my father said.

"It's a great game," Doc Spencer said, sighing a little. "I only wish I was young enough to have another go at it." He looked up and saw me staring at him. "You didn't know I used to do a bit of poaching myself, did you, Danny?"

"No," I said, absolutely flabbergasted.

"Many a night," Doc Spencer went on, "after evening surgery was over, I used to slip out the back door and go striding over the fields to one of my secret places. Sometimes it was pheasants and other times it was trout. Plenty of big brown trout in the stream in those days."

He was still kneeling on the floor beside my father. "Try not to move," he said to him. "Lie quite still."

My father closed his tired eyes, then opened them again. "Which method did you use for pheasants?" he asked.

"Gin and raisins," Doc Spencer said. "I used to soak the raisins in gin for a week, then scatter them in the woods."

"It doesn't work," my father said.

"I know it doesn't," the doctor said. "But it was enormous fun."

"One single pheasant," my father said, "has got to eat at least sixteen gin-soaked raisins before he gets tiddly enough for you to catch him. My own dad proved that with roosters."

"I believe you," the doctor said. "That's why I never caught any. But I was hot stuff with trout. Do you know how to catch a trout, Danny, without using a rod and line?"

"No," I said. "How?"

"You tickle him."

"*Tickle* him?"

"Yes," the doctor said. "Trout, you see, like to lie close in to the river bank. So you go creeping along the bank until you see a big one . . . and you come up behind him . . . and you lie down on your tummy. . . .

and then slowly, very slowly, you lower your hand into the water behind him . . . and you slide it underneath him . . . and you begin to stroke his belly up and down with the tip of one finger . . .”

“Will he really let you do that?” I asked.

“He loves it,” the doctor said. “He loves it so much he sort of dozes off. And as soon as he dozes off you quickly grab hold of him and flip him out of the water on to the bank.”

“That works,” my father said. “But only a great artist can do it. I take my hat off to you, sir.”

“Thank you, William,” Doc Spencer said gravely. He got up off his knees and crossed over to the door of the workshop and looked out to see if the ambulance was coming. “By the way,” he said over his shoulder, “what happened up there in the woods? Did you step in a rabbit hole?”

“It was a slightly bigger hole than that,” my father said.

“What do you mean?”

My father began to describe how he had fallen into the enormous pit.

Doc Spencer spun round and stared down at my father. “I don’t believe it!” he cried.

“It’s perfectly true. Ask Danny.”

“It was deep,” I said. “Horribly deep.”

“But great heavens alive!” the little doctor shouted, jumping up and down with fury. “He can’t do that! Victor Hazell can’t go digging tiger-traps in his woods for human beings! I’ve never heard such a disgusting monstrous thing in all my life!”

“It’s rotten,” my father said.

“It’s worse than that, William! It’s diabolical! Do you know what this means? It means that decent folk like you and me can’t even go out and have a little fun at night without risking a broken leg or arm. We might even break our necks!”

My father nodded.

“I never did like that Victor Hazell,” Doc Spencer said. “I saw him do a filthy thing once.”

“What?” my father asked.

“He had an appointment with me at my surgery. He needed an injection of some sort, I’ve forgotten what. Anyway just by chance I was looking out of the window as he drove up to my door in his whacking great Rolls-Royce. I saw him get out, and I also saw my old dog Bertie dozing on the doorstep. And do you know what that loathsome Victor Hazell did? Instead of stepping over old Bertie, he actually kicked him out of the way with his riding boot.”

“He didn’t!” my father said.

"Oh, yes he did."

"What did you do?"

"I left him sitting in the waiting-room while I picked out the oldest, bluntest needle I could find. Then I rubbed the point of it on a nail-file to make it blunter still. By the time I'd got through with it, it was blunter than a ballpoint pen. Then I called him in and told him to lower his pants and bend over, and when I rammed that needle into his fleshy backside, he screamed like a stuck pig."

"Hooray," my father said.

"He's never been back since," Doc Spencer said. "For which I am truly thankful. Ah, here's the ambulance."

The ambulance drew up near the workshop door and two men in uniform got out. "Bring me a leg splint," the doctor said. One of the men fetched a sort of thin wooden plank from the ambulance. Doc Spencer knelt down once more beside my father and eased the plank very gently underneath my father's left leg. Then he strapped the leg firmly to the plank. The ambulance men brought in a stretcher and placed it on the ground. My father got on to it by himself.

I was still sitting on my chair. Doc Spencer came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "I think you had better come on home with me, young man," he said. "You can stay with us until your father's back from hospital."

"Won't he be home today?" I asked.

"Yes," my father said. "I'll be back this evening."

"I'd rather you stayed in for the night," Doc Spencer said.

"I shall come home this evening," my father said. "Thank you for offering to take Danny, but it won't be necessary. He'll be all right here until I get back. I reckon he'll sleep most of the day anyway, won't you, my love?"

"I think so," I said.

"Just close up the filling-station and go to bed, right?"

"Yes, but come back soon, won't you, Dad."

They carried him into the ambulance on the stretcher and closed the doors. I stood outside the workshop with Doc Spencer and watched the big white thing drive out of the filling-station.

"Do you need any help?" Doc Spencer said.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Go to bed, then, and get a good sleep."

"Yes, I will."

"Call me if you need anything."

"Yes."

The marvellous little doctor got into his car and drove away down the road in the same direction as the ambulance.

10

The Great Shooting Party

As soon as the doctor had driven away from the filling-station, I went into the office and got out the sign that said SORRY CLOSED I hung it on one of the pumps. Then I headed straight for the caravan. I was too tired to undress. I didn't even take off my dirty old sneakers. I just flopped down on the bunk and went to sleep. The time was five minutes past eight in the morning.

More than ten hours later, at six-thirty in the evening, I was woken up by the ambulance men bringing my father back from the hospital. They carried him into the caravan and laid him on the lower bunk.

"Hello, Dad," I said.

"Hello, Danny."

"How are you feeling?"

"A bit whoozy," he said, and he dozed off almost immediately.

As the ambulance men drove away, Doc Spencer arrived and went into the caravan to take a look at the patient. "He'll sleep until tomorrow morning," he said. "Then he'll wake up feeling fine."

I followed the doctor out to his car. "I'm awfully glad he's home," I said.

The doctor opened the car door but he didn't get in. He looked at me very sternly and said, "When did you last have something to eat, Danny?"

"Something to eat?" I said. "Oh . . . well . . . I had . . . er . . ." Suddenly I realised how long it had been I hadn't eaten anything since I had had supper with my father the night before. That was nearly twenty-four hours ago.

Doc Spencer reached into the car and came out with something huge and round wrapped up in greaseproof paper. "My wife asked me to give you this," he said. "I think you'll like it. She's a terrific

cook."

He pushed the package towards me, then he jumped into the car and drove quickly away.

I stood there clasping the big round thing tightly in my hands. I watched the doctor's car as it went down the road and disappeared round the curve, and after it had gone I still stood there watching the empty road.

After a while I turned and walked back up the steps into the caravan with my precious parcel. I placed it in the centre of the table but I didn't unwrap it.

My father lay on the bunk in a deep sleep. He was wearing hospital pyjamas. They had brown and blue stripes. I went over and gently pulled back the blanket to see what they had done to him. Hard white plaster covered the lower part of his leg and the whole of his foot, except for the toes. There was a funny little iron thing sticking out below his foot, presumably for him to walk on. I covered him up again and returned to the table.

Very carefully, I now began to unwrap the greaseproof paper from around the doctor's present, and when I had finished, I saw before me the most enormous and beautiful pie in the world. It was covered all over, top, sides, and bottom, with a rich golden pastry.

I took a knife from beside the sink and cut out a wedge. I started to eat it in my fingers, standing up. It was a cold meat pie. The meat was pink and tender with no fat or gristle in it, and there were hard-boiled eggs buried like treasures in several different places.

The taste was absolutely fabulous. When I had finished the first slice, I cut another and ate that too. God bless Doctor Spencer, I thought. And God bless Mrs Spencer as well.

The next morning, a Monday, my father was up at six o'clock. "I feel great," he said. He started hobbling round the caravan to test his leg. "It hardly hurts at all!" he cried. "I can walk you to school!"

"No," I said. "No."

"I've never missed one yet, Danny."

"It's two miles each way," I said. "Don't do it, Dad, please."

So that day I went to school alone. But he insisted on coming with me the next day. I couldn't stop him. He had put a woollen sock over his plaster foot to keep his toes warm, and there was a hole in the underneath of the sock so that the metal thing could poke through. He walked a bit stiff-legged, but he moved as fast as ever, and the metal thing went *clink* on the road each time he put it down.

And so life at the filling-station returned to normal, or anyway *nearly* to normal. I say nearly because things were definitely not quite the same as they had been before. The difference lay in my father. A change had come over him. It wasn't a big change, but it was enough to make me certain that something was worrying him quite a lot. He would brood a good deal, and there would be silences between us, especially at supper-time. Now and again I would see him standing alone and very still out in front of the filling-station, gazing up the road in the direction of Hazell's Wood.

Many times I wanted to ask him what the trouble was and had I done so, I'm sure he would have told me at once. In any event, I knew that sooner or later I would hear all about it.

I hadn't long to wait.

About ten days after his return from hospital, the two of us were sitting out on the platform of the caravan watching the sun go down behind the big trees on the top of the hill across the valley. We had had our supper but it wasn't my bedtime yet. The September evening was warm and beautiful and very still.

"You know what makes me so hopping mad," he said to me all of a sudden. "I get up in the mornings feeling pretty good. Then about nine o'clock every single day of the week, that huge silver Rolls-Royce comes swishing past the filling-station and I see the great big bloated face of Mr Victor Hazell behind the wheel. I always see it. I can't help it. And as he passes by, he always turns his head in my direction and looks at me. But it's the *way* he looks at me that is so infuriating. There is a sneer under his nose and a smug little smirk around his mouth and although I only see him for three seconds, it makes me madder than mackerel. What's more, I stay mad for the rest of the day."

"I don't blame you," I said.

A silence fell between us. I waited to see what was coming next.

"I'll tell you something interesting," he said at last. "The shooting season for pheasants starts on Saturday. Did you know that?"

"No, Dad, I didn't."

"It always starts on the first of October," he said. "And every year Mr Hazell celebrates the occasion by giving a grand opening-day shooting party."

I wondered what this had to do with my father being madder than a mackerel, but I knew for certain there would be a connection somewhere.

"It is a very famous event, Danny, that shooting party of Mr Hazell's."

"Do lots of people come?" I asked.

"Hundreds," he said. "They come from miles around. Dukes and lords, barons and baronets, wealthy businessmen and all the fancy folk in the county. They come with their guns and their dogs and their wives, and all day long the noise of shooting rolls across the valley. But they don't come because they like Mr Hazell. Secretly they all despise him. They think he's a nasty piece of work."

"Then why do they come, Dad?"

"Because it's the best pheasant shoot in the South of England, that's why they come. But to Mr Hazell it is the greatest day in the year and he is willing to pay almost anything to make it a success. He spends a fortune on those pheasants. Each summer he buys hundreds of young birds from the pheasant-farm and puts them in the wood where the keepers feed them and guard them and fatten them up ready for the great day to arrive. Do you know, Danny, that the cost of rearing and keeping one single pheasant up to the time when it's ready to be shot is equal to the price of one hundred loaves of bread!"

"It's not true."

"I swear it," my father said. "But to Mr Hazell it's worth every penny of it. And do you know why? I makes him feel important. For one day in the year he becomes a big cheese in a little world and even the Duke of So-and-so slaps him on the back and tries to remember his first name when he says goodbye."

My father reached out a hand and scratched the hard plaster just below his left knee. "It itches," he said. "The skin itches underneath the plaster. So I scratch the plaster and pretend I'm scratching the skin."

"Does that help?"

"No," he said, "it doesn't help. But listen, Danny . . ."

"Yes, Dad?"

"I want to tell you something."

He started scratching away again at the plaster on his leg. I waited for him to go on.

"I want to tell you what I would dearly love to do right now."

Here it comes, I thought. Here comes something big and crazy. I could tell something big and crazy was coming simply from watching his face.

"It's a deadly secret, Danny." He paused and looked carefully all around him. And although there was probably not a living person within two miles of us at that moment, he now leaned close to me and lowered his voice to a soft whisper. "I would like," he whispered, "to find a way of poaching so many pheasants from Hazell's Wood that there wouldn't be any left for the big opening-day shoot on October the first."

"Dad!" I cried. "No!"

"Ssshh," he said. "Listen. If only I could find a way of knocking off a couple of hundred birds all in one go, then Mr Hazell's party would be the biggest wash-out in history!"

"Two hundred!" I said. "*That's impossible!*"

"Just imagine, Danny," he went on, "what a triumph, what a glorious victory that would be! All the dukes and lords and famous men would arrive in their big cars . . . and Mr Hazell would strut about like a peacock welcoming them and saying things like 'Plenty of birds out there for you this year, Lord Thistlethwaite,' and, 'Ah, my dear Sir Godfrey, this is a great season for pheasants, a very great season indeed' . . . and then out they would all go with their guns under their arms . . . and they would take up their positions surrounding the famous wood . . . and inside the wood a whole army of hired beaters would start shouting and yelling and bashing away at the undergrowth to drive the pheasants out of the wood towards the waiting guns . . . and lo and behold . . . there wouldn't be a single pheasant to be found anywhere! And Mr Victor Hazell's face would be redder than a boiled beetroot! Now wouldn't that be the most fantastic marvellous thing if we could pull it off, Danny?"

My father had got himself so worked up that he rose to his feet and hobbled down the caravan steps and

started pacing back and forth in front of me. “Wouldn’t it, though?” he shouted. “Wouldn’t it be terrific?”

“Yes,” I said.

“But how?” he cried. “How could it be done?”

“There’s no way, Dad. It’s hard enough getting just *two* birds up in those woods, let alone *two hundred*.”

“I know that,” my father said. “It’s the keepers that make it so difficult.”

“How many are there?” I asked.

“Keepers? Three, and they’re always around.”

“Do they stay right through the night?”

“No, not through the night,” my father said. “They go off home as soon as all the pheasants are safely up in the trees, roosting. But nobody’s ever discovered a way of poaching a roosting pheasant, not even my own dad who was the greatest expert in the world. It’s about your bedtime,” he added. “Off you go and I’ll come in and tell you a story.”

11

The Sleeping Beauty

Five minutes later, I was lying on my bunk in my pyjamas. My father came in and lit the oil-lamp hanging from the ceiling. It was getting dark earlier now. “All right,” he said. “What sort of story shall we have tonight?”

“Dad,” I said. “Wait a minute.”

“What is it?”

“Can I ask you something? I’ve just had a bit of an idea.”

“Go on,” he said.

“You know that bottle of sleeping pills Doc Spencer gave you when you came back from hospital?”

“I never used them. Don’t like the things.”

“Yes, but is there any reason why those wouldn’t work on a pheasant?”

My father shook his head sadly from side to side.

"Wait," I said.

"It's no use, Danny. No pheasant in the world is going to swallow those lousy red capsules. Surely you know that."

"You're forgetting the raisins, Dad."

"The raisins? What's that got to do with it?"

"Now listen," I said. "Please listen. We take a raisin. We soak it till it swells. Then we make a tiny slit in one side of it with a razor-blade. Then we hollow it out a little. Then we open up one of your red capsules and pour all the powder into the raisin. Then we get a needle and thread and very carefully we sew up the slit . . ."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father's mouth slowly beginning to open.

"Now," I said. "We have a nice clean-looking raisin chock full of sleeping-pill powder and that ought to be enough to put any pheasant to sleep. Don't you think so?"

My father was staring at me with a look of such wonder in his eyes he might have been seeing a vision.

"Oh, my darling boy," he said softly. "Oh, my sainted aunt! I do believe you've got it. Yes, I do. I do. I do."

He was suddenly so choked up with excitement that for a few seconds he couldn't say any more. He came and sat on the edge of my bunk and there he stayed, nodding his head very slowly up and down.

"You really think it would work?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said quietly. "It'll work all right. With this method we could prepare *two hundred* raisins, and all we'd have to do is scatter them round the feeding grounds at sunset, and then walk away. Half an hour later, after it was dark and the keepers had all gone home, we would go back into the wood . . . and the pheasants would be up in the trees by then, roosting . . . and the pills would be beginning to work . . . and the pheasants would be starting to feel groggy . . . they'd be wobbling and trying to keep their balance . . . and soon every pheasant that had eaten *one single raisin* would topple over unconscious and fall to the ground. Why, they'd be dropping out of the trees like apples! And all we'd have to do is walk around picking them up!"

"Can I do it with you, Dad?"

"And they'd never catch us either," my father said not hearing me. "We'd simply stroll through the woods dropping a few raisins here and there as we went, and even if they were *watching* us they wouldn't notice anything."

"Dad," I said, raising my voice, "you *will* let me come with you?"

"Danny, my love," he said, laying a hand on my knee and gazing at me with eyes large and bright as two

stars, “if this thing works, it will *revolutionize* poaching.”

“Yes, Dad, but can I come with you?”

“Come with me?” he said, floating out of his dream at last. “But my dear boy, of course you can come with me! It’s your idea! You must be there to see it happening! Now then!” he cried, bouncing up off the bed. “Where are those pills?”

The small bottle of red capsules was standing beside the sink. It had been there ever since my father returned from hospital. He fetched it and unscrewed the top and poured the capsules on to my blanket. “Let’s count them,” he said.

We counted them together. There were exactly fifty. “That’s not enough,” he said. “We need two hundred at least.” Then he cried out, “Wait! Hold it! There’s no problem!” He began carefully putting the capsules back into the bottle, and as he did so he said, “All we’ve got to do, Danny, is divide the powder from one capsule among four raisins. In other words, quarter the dose. That way we would have enough to fill two hundred raisins.”

“But would a quarter of one of those pills be strong enough to put a pheasant to sleep?” I asked.

“Of course it would, my dear boy. Work it out for yourself. How much smaller is a pheasant than a man?”

“Many, many times smaller.”

“There you are then. If one pill is enough to put a fully-grown man to sleep, you’ll only need a tiny bit of that for a pheasant. What we’re giving him will knock the old pheasant for a loop! He won’t know what’s hit him!”

“But Dad, two hundred raisins aren’t going to get you two hundred pheasants.”

“Why not?”

“Because the greediest birds are surely going to gobble up about ten raisins each.”

“You’ve got a point there,” my father said. “You certainly have. But somehow I don’t think it will happen that way. Not if I’m very careful and spread them out over a wide area. Don’t worry about it, Danny. I’m sure I can work it.”

“And you promise I can come with you?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “And we shall call this method *The Sleeping Beauty*. It will be a landmark in the history of poaching!”

I sat very still in my bunk, watching my father as he put each capsule back into the bottle. I could hardly believe what was happening, that we were really going to do it, that he and I alone were going to try to swipe practically the entire flock of Mr Victor Hazell’s prize pheasants. Just thinking about it sent little shivers of electricity running all over my skin.

"Exciting, isn't it?" my father said.

"I don't dare think about it, Dad. It makes me shiver all over."

"Me too," he said. "But we must keep very calm from now on. We must make our plans very very carefully. Today is Wednesday. The shooting party is next Saturday."

"Cripes!" I said. "That's in three days' time! When do you and I go up to the wood and do the job?"

"The night before," my father said. "On the Friday. In that way they won't discover that all the pheasants have disappeared until it's too late and the party has begun."

"Friday's the day after tomorrow! My goodness, Dad, we'll have to hurry if we're going to get two hundred raisins ready before then!"

My father stood up and began pacing the floor of the caravan. "Here's the plan of action," he said. "Listen carefully . . .

"Tomorrow is Thursday. When I walk you to school, I shall go into Cooper's Stores in the village and buy two packets of seedless raisins. And in the evening we will put the raisins in to soak for the night."

"But that only gives us Friday to get ready two hundred raisins," I said. "Each one will have to be cut open and filled with powder and sewed up again, and I'll be at school all day . . ."

"No, you won't," my father said. "You will be suffering from a very nasty cold on Friday and I shall be forced to keep you home from school."

"Hooray!" I said.

"We will not open the filling-station at all on Friday," he went on. "Instead we will shut ourselves in here and prepare the raisins. We'll easily get them done between us in one day. And that evening, off we'll go up the road towards the wood to do the job. Is that all clear?"

He was like a general announcing the plan of battle to his staff.

"All clear," I said.

"And Danny, not a whisper of this to any of your friends at school."

"Dad, you know I wouldn't!"

He kissed me good-night and turned the oil-lamp down low, but it was a long time before I went to sleep.