The Champion of the World

All day, when not selling petrol, we had been leaning over the table in the office of my petrol station, preparing the raisins. We had a hundred and ninety-six of them to do altogether, and it was nearly evening before we had finished.

'Don't they look wonderful!' Claud cried, rubbing his hands together hard. 'What time is it, Gordon?'

'Just after five.'

Through the window we could see a car arriving at the petrol pumps, with a woman at the wheel and about eight children in the back, eating ice creams.

'We ought to be going soon,' Claud said. 'The plan won't work if we don't arrive before sunset.' He was getting nervous now.

We both went outside, and Claud gave the woman her petrol. When she had gone, he remained standing in the middle of the yard, looking anxiously up at the sun.

'All right,' I said. 'Lock up.'

He went quickly from pump to pump, locking each one.

'You'd better take off that yellow sweater,' he said. 'You'll be shining like a light out there in the moonlight.'

'I'll be all right.'

'You will not,' he said. 'Take it off, Gordon, please. I'll see you in three minutes.'

He disappeared into his hut behind the petrol station, and I went and changed my yellow sweater for a blue one.

When we met again outside, Claud was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a dark-green sweater. On his head he wore a brown cloth cap pulled down low over his eyes.

'What's under there?' I asked, staring at his unusually thick waist.

He pulled up his sweater and showed me two very thin but very large white cotton bags tied neatly and tightly around his waist. 'To carry the stuff,' he said.

'I see.'

'Let's go,' he said.

'I still think we ought to take the car.'

'It's too risky. They'll see it parked.'

'But it's over five kilometres up to that wood.'

'Yes,' he said. 'And I suppose you realize we can get six months in prison if they catch us.'

'You never told me that.'

'Didn't I?'

'I'm not coming,' I said. 'It's not worth it.'

'The walk will be good for you, Gordon. Come on.'

It was a calm, sunny evening, with little clouds hanging motionless in the sky, and the valley was cool and very quiet as the two of us began walking along the grass on the side of the road that ran between the hills towards Oxford.

'Have you got the raisins?' Claud asked.

'They're in my pocket.'

'Good,' he said. 'Wonderful.'

Ten minutes later, we turned left off the main road into a narrow side road with high bushes on either side, and then it was all uphill.

'How many keepers are there?' I asked.

'Three.'

Claud threw away a half-finished cigarette and lit another. 'Don't tell anyone how we've done it, do you understand? Because if anyone heard, every fool in the district would do the same thing, and there wouldn't be a pheasant left.'

'I won't say a word.'

'You ought to be very proud of yourself,' he went on. 'There have been clever men studying this problem for hundreds of

years, and not one of them's ever found anything even a quarter as clever as you have. Why didn't you tell me about it before?'

'You never asked for my opinion,' I said.

And that was the truth. In fact, until the day before, Claud had never even offered to discuss with me the subject of poaching. Often, on a summer's evening when work was finished, I had seen him disappearing up the road towards the woods; and sometimes as I watched him through the window of the petrol station, I would wonder exactly what he was going to do, what tricks he was going to practise all alone up there under the trees at night. He seldom came back until very late and he never, absolutely never, brought anything with him on his return. But the following afternoon – I couldn't imagine how he did it – there would always be a pheasant or a rabbit hanging up in the hut behind the petrol station.

This summer he had been particularly active, and during the past couple of months he had been going out four and sometimes five nights a week. But that was not all. It seemed to me that recently his whole attitude to poaching had changed. He was more purposeful about it now, and I suspected that it had become a kind of private war against the famous Mr Victor Hazel himself. Mr Hazel was extremely rich and his property stretched a long way down each side of the valley. He was a brewer, with no charm at all and few good points. He hated all poor people because he himself had once been poor, and he tried to mix with what he believed were the right kind of people. He hunted and gave shooting-parties and every day he drove a big, black Rolls-Royce past the petrol station on his way to and from his factory. As he drove by, we would sometimes see his great, shining face above the wheel.

Anyway, the day before, which was Wednesday, Claud had suddenly said to me, 'I'll be going up to Hazel's woods again tonight. Why don't you come along?'

'Who, me?'

'It's about the last chance this year for pheasants,' he had said. 'The shooting season begins on Saturday, and the birds will be scattered all over the place after that – if there are any left.'

'Why the sudden invitation?' I had asked.

'No special reason, Gordon. No reason at all.'

'I suppose you keep a gun hidden away up there?'

'A gun!' he cried, disgusted. 'Nobody ever *shoots* pheasants, didn't you know that? If you shoot a gun in Hazel's woods, the keepers will hear you.'

'Then how do you do it?'

'Ah,' he said. There was a long pause. Then he said, 'Do you think you could keep your mouth closed if I told you?'

'Certainly.'

'I've never told this to anyone else in my whole life, Gordon.'

'I am greatly honoured,' I said. 'You can trust me completely.'

He turned his head, looking at me with pale eyes. 'I am now going to tell you the three best ways in the world of poaching a pheasant,' he said. 'And, as you're the guest on this little trip, I am going to give you the choice of which one you'd like to use tonight. Now, here's the first big secret.' He paused. 'Pheasants,' he whispered softly, 'are mad about raisins.'

'Raisins?'

'Just ordinary raisins. My father discovered that more than forty years ago. He was a great poacher, Gordon. Possibly the best there's ever been in the history of England. My father studied poaching like a scientist. He really did.'

'I believe you.'

Claud paused and glanced over his shoulder, as if he wanted to make sure there was no one listening. 'Here's how it's done,' he said. 'First, you take a few raisins and you put them in water overnight to make them nice and big and juicy. Then you get a bit of good stiff horsehair and you cut it into small lengths. Then

you push one of these lengths through the middle of each raisin, so that there's a small piece sticking out on either side. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'So, the pheasant comes along and eats one of these raisins. Right? And you're watching him from behind a tree. So what then?'

'I imagine it sticks in its throat.'

'That's obvious, Gordon. But here's the strange thing. Here's what my father discovered. The moment that happens, the bird never moves his feet again! He becomes absolutely rooted to the spot and you can walk calmly out from the place where you're hiding and pick him up in your hands.'

'I don't believe it.'

'I swear it,' he said. 'You can fire a gun in his ear and he won't even jump. It's just one of those unexplainable little things, but you have to be very clever to discover it.'

He paused and there was a look of pride in his eyes as he thought for a moment of his father, the great inventor.

'So that's method number one,' he said. 'Method number two is even more simple. You take a fishing line. Then you put the raisin on the hook, and you fish for pheasants just as you fish for a fish. You let out the line by about fifty metres, and you lie there on your stomach in the bushes, waiting until a pheasant starts eating. Then you pull him in.'

'What is method number three?' I asked.

'Ah,' he said. 'Number three is the best one. It was the last one my father ever invented before he died. First of all, you dig a little hole in the ground. Then you twist a piece of paper into the shape of a hat and you fit this into the hole, with the hollow end upwards, like a cup. Then you put some glue around the edge. After that, you lay some raisins on the ground leading up to it and drop a few raisins into the paper cup. The old pheasant

comes along, and when he gets to the hole he puts his head inside to eat the raisins, and the next thing he knows is that he's got a paper hat stuck over his eyes and he can't see anything. Isn't it wonderful what some people think of, Gordon? Don't you agree? No bird in the world will move if you cover its eyes.'

'Your father was very clever,' I said.

'Then choose which of the three methods you like best, and we'll use it tonight.'

'Yes, but let me ask you something first. I've just had an idea.'

'Keep it,' he said. 'You are talking about a subject you know nothing about.'

'Do you remember that bottle of sleeping pills the doctor gave me last month when I had a bad back?'

'What about them?'

'Is there any reason why they wouldn't work on a pheasant?'

Claud closed his eyes and shook his head.

'Wait,' I said.

'It's not worth discussing,' he said. 'No pheasant in the world is going to swallow those red pills.'

'You're forgetting the raisins,' I said. 'Now listen to this. We take a raisin. Then we put it in water. Then we make a small cut in one side of it. Then we hollow it out a little. Then we open up one of my red pills and pour all the powder into the raisin. Then we get a needle and thread and very carefully we sew up the cut. Now . . .'

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

'Now,' I said, 'we have a nice, clean-looking raisin with sleeping powder inside it, and that's enough to make the average *man* unconscious; it will easily work on *birds*.'

I paused for ten seconds to allow him time to understand.

'And with this method we could really work with huge numbers. We could prepare twenty raisins if we wanted to, and all

we'd have to do is throw them on the ground where the birds feed at sunset and then walk away. Half an hour later, we'd come back and the pills would be beginning to work and the pheasants would be up in the branches by then. They'd feel sleepy and soon every pheasant that had eaten one single raisin would fall over unconscious and fall to the ground. They'd be dropping out of the trees like apples, and we could just walk around picking them up!'

Claud was staring at me.

'And they'd never catch us either. We'd simply walk through the woods, dropping a few raisins here and there as we went, and even if the keepers were watching us, they wouldn't notice anything.'

'Gordon,' he said, 'if this thing works, it will *revolutionize* poaching.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'How many pills have you got left?' he asked.

'Forty-nine. There were fifty in the bottle, and I've only used one.'

'Forty-nine's not enough. We want at least two hundred.'

'Are you mad?' I cried.

He walked slowly away and stood by the door with his back to me, looking at the sky. 'Two hundred at least,' he said quietly. 'It's not worth doing it unless we have two hundred.'

What is it now, I wondered. What's he trying to do?

'This is almost the last chance we have before the season starts,' he said.

'I couldn't possibly get any more.'

'You wouldn't want us to come back empty-handed, would you?'

'But why so *many*?'

Claud looked at me. 'Why not?' he said gently. 'Do you have any objections?'

My God, I thought suddenly. He wants to wreck Mr Victor Hazel's opening-day shooting-party.

Mr Hazel's party took place on the first of October every year and it was a very famous event. Gentlemen, some with noble titles and some who were just very rich, came long distances, with their dogs and their wives, and all day long the noise of the shooting rolled across the valley. There were always enough pheasants for everyone; each summer the woods were filled with dozens and dozens of young birds at great expense, but to Mr Victor Hazel it was worth every penny of it. He became, if only for a few hours, a big man in a little world.

'You get us two hundred of those pills,' Claud said, 'and then it'll be worth doing.'

'I can't,' I said. 'Why couldn't we divide one pill among four raisins?'

'But would a quarter of a pill be strong enough for each bird?'

'Work it out for yourself. It's all done by body weight. You'd be giving it about twenty times more than is necessary.'

'Then we'll quarter the amount,' he said, rubbing his hands together. He paused and then thought for a moment. 'We'll have one hundred and ninety-six raisins!'

'Do you realize what that means?' I said. 'They'll take hours to prepare.'

'It doesn't matter!' he cried. 'We'll go tomorrow instead. We'll put the raisins in water overnight and then we'll have all morning and afternoon to get them ready.'

And that was exactly what we did.

Now, twenty-four hours later, we were on our way. We had been walking steadily for about forty minutes, and we were nearing the point where the path curved round to the right and ran along the top of the hill towards the big woods where the pheasants lived. We were about two kilometres away.

'I don't suppose these keepers might be carrying guns?' I asked.

'All keepers carry guns,' Claud said.

I had been afraid of that.

'It's mostly for the foxes,' he added.

'Ah.'

'Of course, they sometimes shoot at a poacher.'

'You're joking.'

'They only do it from behind – when you're running away. They like to shoot you in the legs at about fifty metres.'

'They can't do that!' I cried. 'It's a criminal offence!'

'So is poaching,' Claud said.

We walked on for a while in silence. The sun was low on our right now, and the road was in shadow.

We had reached the top of the hill and now we could see the woods ahead of us, large and dark, with the sun going down behind the trees.

'You'd better let me have those raisins,' Claud said.

I gave him the bag, and he put it gently into his trouser pocket.

'No talking when we're inside,' he said. 'Just follow me and try not to break any branches.'

Five minutes later we were there. The path ran right up to the wood itself and then went round the edge of it for about three hundred metres, with only a few bushes in between. Claud slipped through the bushes on his hands and knees and I followed.

It was cool and dark inside the wood. No sunlight came in at all.

'This is frightening,' I said.

'Sh–h–h!'

Claud was very nervous. He was walking just ahead of me. He kept his head moving all the time and his eyes were looking from side to side, searching for danger. I tried doing the same, but I soon began to imagine a keeper behind every tree, so I gave it up.

Then a patch of sky appeared ahead of us in the roof of the forest, and I knew this must be the feeding grounds.

We were now advancing quickly, running from tree to tree and stopping and waiting and listening and running on again, and then at last we knelt safely behind a big tree, right on the edge of the feeding grounds, and Claud smiled and pointed through the branches at the pheasants.

The place was absolutely full of birds. There must have been two hundred of them at least.

'Do you see what I mean?' Claud whispered.

It was an amazing sight – a poacher's dream. And how close they were! Some of them were not more than ten steps from where we were kneeling. They were brown and so fat that their feathers almost brushed the ground as they walked. I glanced at Claud. His big cow-like face showed his pleasure. The mouth was slightly open, and there was a kind of dream-like look in his eyes as he stared at the pheasants.

There was a long pause. The birds made a strange noise as they moved about among the dead leaves.

'Ah-ha,' Claud said softly a minute later. 'Do you see the keeper?'

'Where?'

'Over on the other side, standing by that big tree. Look carefully.'

'Good heavens!'

'It's all right. He can't see us.'

We knelt close to the ground, watching the keeper. He was a small man with a cap on his head and a gun under his arm. He never moved. He was like a little post standing there.

'Let's go,' I whispered.

The keeper's face was shadowed by his cap, but it seemed to me that he was looking directly at us.

'I'm not staying here,' I said.

'Sh–h–h!' Claud said.

Slowly, never taking his eyes off the keeper, he reached into his pocket and brought out a single raisin. He placed it in his right hand and then quickly threw it high into the air. I watched it as it went over the bushes, and I saw it land within a metre of two birds standing together beside an old tree. Both birds turned their heads at the drop of the raisin. Then one of them jumped over and ate it quickly.

I glanced up at the keeper. He hadn't moved.

Claud threw a second raisin; then a third, and a fourth and a fifth. At this point I saw the keeper turn his head away to look at the woods behind him. Quickly, Claud pulled the paper bag out of his pocket. With a great movement of the arm he threw the whole handful high over the bushes. They fell softly like raindrops on dry leaves. Every pheasant in the place must have heard them fall. There was a noise of wings and a rush to find the raisins. The birds were eating all of them madly.

'Follow me,' Claud whispered. 'And keep down.' He started moving away quickly on his hands and knees, under cover of the bushes.

I went after him, and we went along like this for about a hundred metres.

'Now run!' Claud said.

We got to our feet and ran, and a few minutes later we came out through the bushes into the open safety of the path.

'It went wonderfully,' Claud said, breathing heavily. 'Didn't it go absolutely wonderfully?' His big face was red. 'In another five minutes, it'll be completely dark inside the woods, and that keeper will be going off home to his supper.'

'I think I'll go, too,' I said.

'You're a great poacher,' Claud said. He sat down on the grass bank and lit a cigarette.

The sun had set now and the sky was a pale blue, faintly coloured with yellow. In the wood behind us, the shadows and

the spaces between the trees were turning from grey to black.

'How long does a sleeping pill take to work?' Claud asked.

'Look out!' I said. 'There's someone coming.'

The man had appeared silently and suddenly out of the half-darkness, and he was only thirty metres away when I saw him.

'Another keeper,' Claud said.

We both looked at the keeper as he came down the road towards us. He had a gun under his arm, and there was a black dog walking at his feet. He stopped when he was a few steps away, and the dog stopped with him and stayed behind him, watching us through the keeper's legs.

'Good evening,' Claud said in a nice friendly way.

This one was a tall man of about forty with quick eyes and hard, dangerous hands.

'I know you,' he said softly, coming closer. 'I know both of you.'

Claud did not answer this.

'You're from the petrol station, right?' His lips were thin and dry. 'You're Cubbage and Hawes and you're from the petrol station on the main road. Right? Get out.'

Claud sat on the bank, smoking his cigarette and looking at the keeper's feet.

'Go on,' the man said. 'Get out.'

'This is a public road,' Claud said. 'Please go away.'

The keeper moved the gun from his left arm to his right. 'You're waiting,' he said, 'to commit a criminal act. I could have you arrested for that.'

'No, you couldn't,' Claud said.

All this made me rather nervous.

'I've been watching you for some time,' the keeper said, looking at Claud.

'It's getting late,' I said. 'Shall we go on?'

Claud threw away his cigarette and got slowly to his feet. 'All right,' he said. 'Let's go.'

We wandered off down the road, the way we had come, leaving him standing there, and soon the man was out of sight in the half-darkness behind us.

'That's the head keeper,' said Claud. 'His name is Rabbetts.'

'Let's get out of here,' I said.

'Come in here,' Claud said.

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

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

We sat quietly behind the bushes, waiting for the keeper to walk past us on his way home.

'Here he is,' Claud whispered. 'Don't move.'

The keeper came softly along the road with the dog walking beside him, and we watched them through the bushes as they went by.

'He won't be coming back tonight,' Claud said.

'How do you know that?'

'A keeper never waits for you in a wood if he knows where you live. He goes to your house, hides and watches for you to come back.'

'That's worse.'

'No, it isn't. Not if you put what you've poached somewhere else before you go home. He can't do anything then.'

'What about the other one – the one in the feeding grounds?'

'He's gone, too.'

'You can't be sure of that.'

'I've been watching these men for months, Gordon. Honestly, I know all their habits. There's no danger.'

A few minutes later, I followed Claud back into the wood. It was dark in there now, and very silent, and we moved cautiously forward.

'Here's where we threw the raisins,' Claud said.

I looked through the bushes. The area was illuminated by the moonlight.

'You're quite sure the keeper's gone?'

'I *know* he's gone.'

I could just see Claud's face under his cap, the pale lips, and the large eyes with excitement dancing in each of them.

'Are they asleep?' I asked.

'Yes. In the branches.'

'Where?'

'All around. They don't go far.'

'What do we do next?'

'We stay here and wait. I brought you a light,' he added, and he handed me one of those small pocket torches shaped like a pen. 'You may need it.'

We stood there for a long time, waiting for something to happen.

'I've just had a thought,' I said. 'If a bird can keep its balance on a branch when it's asleep, then surely there's no reason why the pills should make it fall down.'

Claud looked at me quickly.

'It's not dead,' I said. 'It's still only sleeping.'

'It's drugged,' Claud said.

'But that's just a deeper sort of sleep.'

There was a silence.

'We should have tried it first with chickens,' Claud said. 'My father would have done that.'

'Your father was clever,' I said.

At that moment there came a soft thump from the woods.

'Hey!' I said.

'Sh–h–h!'

We stood listening.

Thump! 'There's another!'

It was a heavy sound, as if a small bag of sand had been

dropped from about shoulder height.

Thump! 'They're pheasants!' I cried.

'Wait!'

'I'm sure they're pheasants.'

Thump! Thump!

'You're right!'

We ran back into the wood.

'Where were they?' I asked.

'Over here! Two of them were over here!'

'I thought they were this way.'

'Keep looking!' Claud shouted. 'They can't be far.'

We searched for about another minute.

'Here's one!' he called out.

When I got to him, he was holding a wonderful bird in both hands. We looked at it closely with our torches.

'It's unconscious,' Claud said. 'It's still alive. I can feel its heart.'

Thump! 'There's another,' he cried.

Thump! Thump! 'Two more!'

Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump!

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

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. They were warm, the feathers wonderfully soft in my hands.

'Where shall I put them?' I called out. I was holding them by the legs.

'Lay them here, Gordon! Just pile them there where it's light.'

Claud was standing 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 like a child who has just discovered that the whole world is made of chocolate.

Thump!

Thump! Thump!

'I don't like it,' I said. 'It's too many.'

'It's beautiful!' he cried, and he threw down 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 threw them with the others. Then six more. Then six more after that. And still they kept falling.

Claud was madly happy. He was rushing about under the trees. I could see the beam of his light waving around in the dark, and each time he found a bird, he gave a little cry of pleasure.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

'Mr Victor Hazel ought to hear this!'

'Don't shout,' I said. 'There might be keepers.'

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

'Keep searching!' Claud shouted. 'There are a lot more on the ground.'

'Don't you think we ought to stop?'

'No,' he said.

We went on searching. We looked under every tree within a hundred metres of the feeding grounds – north, south, east and west – and I think we found most of them. At the collecting point there was a very big pile of pheasants.

'It's wonderful,' Claud said. 'It's wonderful.' He was staring at them in a kind of dream.

'We'd better just take half a dozen each and get out quickly,' I said.

'I would like to count them, Gordon.'

'There's no time for that.'

'I must count them.'

'No,' I said. 'Come on.'

'One, two, three, four ...' He began counting them very carefully, picking up each bird and laying it down gently to one side. The moon was directly above now and everything was illuminated.

'I'm not standing around here like this,' I said. I walked back a few steps and hid myself in the shadows, waiting for him to finish.

'A hundred and seventeen, a hundred and eighteen, a hundred and nineteen, a hundred and twenty!' he cried. 'One hundred and twenty birds! It's an all-time record!'

I did not doubt it for a moment.

'The most my father ever got in one night was fifteen.'

'You're the champion of the world,' I said. 'Are you ready now?'

'One minute,' he answered, and he pulled up his sweater and began to unwind the two big white cotton bags from around his waist. 'Here's yours,' he said, handing one of them to me. 'Fill it up quickly.'

'You don't think that keeper is watching us right now, do you, from behind a tree?'

'There's no chance of that,' Claud said. 'He's down at the petrol station, as I told you, waiting for us both to come home.'

We started loading the pheasants into the bags.

'There'll be a taxi waiting for us in the road,' Claud said.

'What?'

'I always go back in a taxi, Gordon. Didn't you know that? A taxi is impersonal. No one knows who's inside a taxi except the taxi driver. My father taught me that.'

'Which driver?'

'Charlie Kinch. He's glad to help.'

We finished loading the pheasants, and I tried to carry my bag on my shoulder. The bag had about sixty birds in it and it was heavy. Very heavy.

'I can't carry this,' I said. 'We'll have to leave some of them behind.'

'Drag it,' Claud said. 'Just pull it behind you.'

We started off through the black woods, pulling the pheasants behind us.

'We'll never get them all the way back to the village like this,' I said.

'Charlie's never disappointed me yet,' Claud said.

We came to the edge of the woods and looked through the bushes into the road. The taxi was there, not five metres away. Claud said, 'Charlie boy,' very softly, and the old man behind the wheel put his head out into the moonlight and gave us a smile. We slid through the bushes, dragging the bags after us.

'Hello!' Charlie said. 'What's this?'

'Potatoes,' Claud told him. 'Open the door.'

Two minutes later we were safely inside the taxi, driving slowly down the hill towards the village.

It was all over now. Claud was very happy, full of pride and excitement, and he kept leaning forward and tapping Charlie on the shoulder and saying, 'What do you think, Charlie? What do you think about this?' and Charlie kept glancing back at the large full bags lying on the floor between us and saying, 'How did you do it?'

'There's a dozen of them for you, Charlie,' Claud said.

Charlie said, 'I think pheasants are going to be a bit scarce up

at Mr Hazel's opening-day shooting-party this year,' and Claud said, 'I imagine they are, Charlie. I imagine they are.'

'What are you going to do with a hundred and twenty pheasants?' I asked.

'Put them in the freezer at the petrol station,' Claud said.

'Not tonight, I hope.'

'No, Gordon, not tonight. We leave them at Bessie's house tonight.'

'Bessie who?'

'Bessie Organ.'

'Bessie Organ!' I was absolutely amazed. Mrs Organ was the wife of the local vicar, Jack Organ.

'Bessie always delivers my birds. Didn't you know that?'

'I don't know anything,' I said.

'Bessie's a clever girl,' Charlie said.

We were driving through the village now and the street lamps were still on and the men were wandering home from the pub.

'The vicar loves a roast pheasant,' Claud said.

The taxi turned left and went in through the gates of the vicar's house. There were no lights on there, and nobody met us. Claud and I put the pheasants in the hut behind the house, and then we said goodbye to Charlie Kinch and walked back in the moonlight to the petrol station. I don't know whether or not Mr Rabbetts was watching us as we went in.

'Here she comes,' Claud said to me the next morning.

'Who?'

'Bessie – Bessie Organ.' He spoke the name proudly, as if he were a general referring to his bravest officer. 'Down there,' he said, pointing.

Far away down the road, I could see a small female figure advancing towards us.

'What's she pushing?' I asked.

'There's only one safe way of delivering pheasants,' he announced, 'and that's under a baby.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Of course.'

'That'll be young Christopher Organ in the pram, aged one and a half years. He's a lovely child, Gordon.'

I could just see the small face of a baby sitting up high in the pram.

'There are sixty or seventy pheasants at least under that little lad,' Claud said happily. 'Just imagine that.'

'You can't fit sixty or seventy pheasants into a pram,' I said.

'You can if it's got a good, deep space underneath it, and if you pack them in tightly, right up to the top. All you need is a sheet. You'd be surprised how little room a pheasant takes up when it's asleep.'

We waited by the pumps for Bessie Organ to arrive. It was one of those warm, windless September mornings, with a darkening sky and a smell of thunder in the air.

'Right through the village,' Claud said. 'Good old Bessie.'

'She seems in rather a hurry to me.'

Claud lit a new cigarette. 'Bessie is never in a hurry,' he said.

'She certainly isn't walking slowly,' I told him. 'Look.'

He looked at her through the smoke of his cigarette. Then he took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked again.

'Well?' I said.

'She does seem to be going rather quickly, doesn't she?' he said carefully.

'She's going *very* quickly.'

There was a pause. Claud was beginning to stare very hard at the approaching woman. 'Perhaps she doesn't want to get caught in the rain, Gordon. She thinks it's going to rain, and she doesn't want the baby to get wet.'

'She's *running*,' I cried. 'Look!' Bessie had suddenly started to run at top speed.