

Claud stood very still, watching the woman; and in the silence that followed, I thought I could hear a baby screaming.

'There's something wrong with that baby,' I said. 'Listen.'

At this point, Bessie was about two hundred metres away from us, but was approaching fast.

'Can you hear him now?' I said. 'He's screaming his head off.'

The small, high voice in the distance was growing louder every second.

'Perhaps the baby's ill. There are a thousand and one things that can happen to little babies like that,' Claud said.

'Of course.'

'Whatever it is,' he continued, 'I wish she'd stop running.'

A long lorry loaded with bricks came up beside Bessie, and the driver slowed down and put his head out of the window to stare. Bessie ran on, and she was so close now that I could see her big red face, with the mouth wide open, breathing heavily.

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

Claud let out a cry of terror.

The fool in the lorry going along beside Bessie roared with laughter. The pheasant flew around sleepily for a few seconds, then it lost height and landed in the grass by the side of the road. Bessie kept on running.

Then a second pheasant flew up out of the pram.

Then a third and a fourth. Then a fifth.

'My God!' I said. 'It's the pills! They've stopped working!'

Bessie covered the last fifty metres at a great speed, and she came running up to the petrol station with birds flying up out of the pram in all directions.

'What's going on?' she cried.

'Go round the back!' I shouted.

But she stopped beside the first pump in the line, and before

we could reach her she had seized the screaming baby in her arms and dragged him out of the pram.

'No! No!' Claud cried, running towards her. 'Don't lift the baby! Put him back! Hold down the sheet!' But she wasn't even listening, and as the weight of the child was suddenly lifted away, a great cloud of pheasants rose up out of the pram – forty or fifty of them at least – and the whole sky above us was filled with huge brown birds beating their wings madly to gain height.

Claud and I started running up and down, waving our arms to frighten them away. 'Go away!' we shouted. 'Shoo! Go away!' But they were too drugged still to take any notice of us, and within half a minute they had come down again and settled themselves all over the front of my petrol station. The place was covered with them. They sat wing to wing along the edges of the roof and a dozen, at least, were sitting on the office window sill. Others were sliding about on top of my second-hand cars. One bird with a fine tail was sitting on top of a petrol pump, and quite a number sat at our feet, shaking their feathers.

Across the road, a line of cars had already started forming behind the brick lorry, and people were opening their doors and getting out and beginning to cross over to have a closer look. I glanced at my watch. It was twenty to nine. At any moment now, I thought, a large black car is going to come along the road from the direction of the village, and the car will be a Rolls-Royce, and the face behind the wheel will be the great shiny brewer's face of Mr Victor Hazel.

'They attacked him!' Bessie was shouting, holding the screaming baby to her chest.

'You go on home, Bessie,' Claud said, white in the face.

'Lock up,' I said. 'Put out the sign. We've gone for the day.'