

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 kilometers 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 practice 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 meters, 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.'