ALL day, in between serving customers, we had been crouching over the table in the office of the filling-station, preparing the raisins. They were plump and soft and swollen from being soaked in water, and when you nicked them with a razor-blade the skin sprang open and the jelly stuff inside squeezed out as easily as you could wish.

But we had a hundred and ninety-six of them to do altogether and the evening was nearly upon us before we had finished.

“Don’t they look marvellous!” Claud cried, rubbing his hands together hard. “What time is it, Gordon?”

“Just after five.”

Through the window we could see a stationwagon pulling up at the pumps with a woman at the wheel and about eight children in the back eating ice-creams.

“We ought to be moving soon,” Claud said.

The whole thing’ll be a washout if we don’t arrive before sunset, you realize that.” He was getting twitchy now. His face had the same flushed and pop-eyed look it got before a dog-race or when there was a date with Glance in the evening.

We both went outside and Claud gave the ¡man the number of gallons she wanted. When she had gone, he remained standing in the middle of the driveway squinting anxiously up at the sun which was now only the width of a man’s hand above the line of trees along the crest of the ridge on the far side of the valley.

“All right,” I said. “Lock up.”

He went quickly from pump to pump, securing each nozzle in its holder with a small padlock.

“You’d better take off that yellow pullover,” he said.

“Why should I?”

“You’ll be shining like a bloody beacon out there in the moonlight.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“You will not,” he said. “Take if off, Gordon, please. I’ll see you in three minutes.” He disappeared into his caravan behind the filling station, and I went indoors and changed my yellow pullover for a blue one.

When we met again outside, Claud was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a dark-green turtleneck sweater. On his head he wore a brown cloth cap with the peak pulled down low over his eyes, and he looked like an apache actor out of a nightclub.

“What’s under there?” I asked, seeing the bulge at his waistline.

He pulled up his sweater and showed me two thin but very large white cotton sacks which were bound neat and tight around his belly. “To carry the stuff,” he said darkly.

“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 three miles up to that wood.”

“Yes,” he said. “And I suppose you realize we can get six months in the clink 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 do you good, Gordon. Come on.”

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

“You got the raisins?” Claud asked.

“They’re in my pocket.”

“Good,” he said. “Marvellous.”

Ten minutes later we turned left off the main road into a narrow lane with high hedges on either side and from now on it was all uphill.

“How many keepers are there?” I asked.

“Three.” minute threw away a half-finished cigarette. A minute later he lit another.

“I don’t usually approve of new methods,” he said. “Not on this sort of a job.

“Of course.”

“But by God, Gordon, I think we’re on to a hot one this time.”

You do?”

“There’s no question about it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“It’ll be a milestone in the history of poaching,” he said. “But don’t you go telling a single soul how we’ve done it, you understand. Because if this ever leaked out we’d have every bloody fool in the district doing 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’s been men with brains studying this problem for hundreds of years and not one of them’s ever come up with anything even a quarter as artful as you have. Why didn’t you tell me about it before?”

“You never invited my opinion,” I said.

And that was the truth. In fact, up until the day before, Claud had never even offered to discuss with me the sacred subject of poaching. Often enough, on a summer’s evening when work was finished, I had seen him with cap on head sliding quietly out of his caravan and disappearing up the road towards the woods; and sometimes, watching him through the windows of the fillingstation, I would find myself wondering exactly what he was going to do, what wily tricks he was going to practise all alone up there under the trees in the dead of night. He seldom came back until very late, and never, absolutely never did he bring any of the spoils with him personally on his return. But the following afternoon-and I couldn’t imagine how he did it-there would

always be a pheasant or a hare or a brace of partridges hanging up in the shed behind the fillingstation for us to eat.

This summer he had been particularly active, and during the last couple of months he had stepped up the tempo to a point where he was going out four and sometimes five nights a week. But that was not all. It seemed to me that recently his whole attitude towards poaching had undergone a subtle and mysterious change. He was more purposeful about it now, more tightlipped and intense than before, and I had the impression that this was not so much a game any longer as a crusade, a sort of private war that Claud was waging single-handed against an invisible and hated enemy.

But who?

I wasn't sure about this, but I had a suspicion that it was none other than the famous Mr Victor Hazel himself, the owner of the land and the pheasants. Mr Hazel was a local brewer with an unbelievably arrogant manner. He was rich beyond words, and his property stretched for miles along either side of the valley. He was a self-made man with no charm at all and previous few virtues. He loathed all persons of humble station, having once been one of them himself, and he strove desperately to mingle with what he believed were the right kind of folk. He rode to hounds and gave shooting-parties and wore fancy waistcoats and every weekday he drove an enormous black Rolls-Royce past the filling-station on his way to the brewery. As he flashed by, we would sometimes catch a glimpse of the great glistening brewer's face above the wheel, pink as a ham, all soft and inflamed from drinking too much beer.

Anyway, yesterday afternoon, right out of the blue, Claud had suddenly said to me, "I'll be going on 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 opens Saturday and the birds'll be scattered all over the place after that-if there's any left."

"Why the sudden invitation?" I had asked, greatly suspicious.

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

"Is it risky?"

He hadn't answered this.

"I suppose you keep a gun or something hidden away up there?"

“A gun!” he cried, disgusted. “Nobody ever shoots pheasants, didn’t you know that? You’ve only got to fire a cap-pistol in Hazel’s woods and the keepers’ll be on you.”

“Then how do you do it?”

“Ah,” he said, and the eyelids drooped over the eyes, veiled and secretive.

There was a long pause. Then he said, “Do you think you could keep your mouth shut if I was to tell you a thing or two?”

“Definitely.”

“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, fixing me with pale eyes. The eyes were large and wet and ox-like, and they were so near to me that I could see my own face reflected upside down in the centre of each.

“I am now about to let you in on the three best ways in the world of poaching a pheasant,” he said. “And seeing that you’re the guest on this little trip, I am going to give you the choice of which one you’d like us to use tonight. How’s that?”

“There’s a catch in this.”

“There’s no catch, Gordon. I swear it.”

“All right, go on.”

“Now, here’s the thing,” he said. “Here’s the first big secret.” He paused and took a long suck at his cigarette. “Pheasants,” he whispered softly, “is crazy about raisins.”

“Raisins?”

“Just ordinary raisins. It’s like a mania with them. My dad discovered that more than forty years ago just like he discovered all three of these methods I’m about to describe to you now.”

“I thought you said your dad was a drunk.”

“Maybe he was. But he was also a great poacher, Gordon. Possibly the greatest there’s ever been in the history of England. My dad studied poaching like a scientist.”

“Is that so?”

“I mean it. I really mean it.”

“I believe you.”

“Do you know,” he said, “my dad used to keep a whole flock of prime cockerels in the back yard purely for experimental purposes.”

“Cockerels?”

“That’s right. And whenever he thought up some new stunt for catching a pheasant, he’d try it out on a cockerel first to see how it worked. That’s how he discovered about raisins. It’s also how he invented the horsehair method.”

Claud paused and glanced over his shoulder as though to make sure that there was nobody listening. “Here’s how it’s done,” he said. “First you take a few raisins and you soak them overnight in water to make them nice and plump and juicy. Then you get a bit of good stiff horsehair and you cut it up into half-inch lengths. Then you push one of these lengths of horsehair through the middle of each raisin so that there’s about an eighth of an inch of it sticking out on either side. You follow?”

“Yes.”

“Now-the old 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 his throat.”

“That’s obvious, Gordon. But here’s the amazing thing. Here’s what my dad discovered. The moment this happens, the bird never moves his feet again! He becomes absolutely rooted to the spot, and there he stands pumping his silly neck up and down just like it was a piston, and all you’ve got to do is walk calmly out from the place where you’re hiding and pick him up 01 your hands.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I swear it,” he said. “Once a pheasant’s had the horsehair you can fire a rifle in his eat and he won’t even jump. It’s just one of those unexplainable little things. But it takes a genius to discover it.”

He paused, and there was a gleam of pride in his eye now as he dwelt for a moment or two upon the memory of his father, the great inventor.

“So that’s Method Number One,” he said. “Method Number Two is even more simple still. All you do is you have a fishing line. Then you bait the hook with a raisin and you fish for the pheasant just like you fish for a fish. You pay out the line about fifty yards and you lie there on your stomach in the bushes waiting till you get a bite. Then you haul him in.”

“I don’t think your father invented that one.”

“It’s very popular with fishermen,” he said, choosing not to hear me. “Keen fishermen who can’t get down to the seaside as often as they want. It gives them a bit of the old thrill. The only trouble is it’s rather noisy. The pheasant squawks like hell as you haul him in, and then every keeper in the wood comes running.”

“What is Method Number Three?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said. “Number Three’s a real beauty. It was the last one my dad ever invented before he passed away.”

“His final great work?”

“Exactly, Gordon. And I can even remember the very day it happened, a Sunday morning It was, and suddenly my dad comes into the rutchen holding a huge white cockerel in his hands and he says, “I think I’ve got it!’ There’s a little smile on his face and a shine of glory in his eyes and he comes in very soft and quiet and he puts the bird down right in the middle of the kitchen table and he says, “By God I think I’ve got a good one this time!’ “A good what?’ Mum says, looking up from the sink. “Horace, take that filthy bird off my table.’ The cockerel has a funny little paper hat over its head, like an ice-cream cone upside down, and my dad is pointing to it proudly. “Stroke him,’ he says. “He won’t move an inch.’ The cockerel starts scratching away at the paper hat with one of its feet, but the hat seems to be stuck on with glue and it won’t come off. “No bird in the world is going to run away once you cover up his eyes,’ my dad says, and he starts poking the cockerel with his finger and pushing it around on the table, but it doesn’t take the slightest bit of notice. “You can have this one,’ he says, talking to Mum. “You can kill it and dish it up for dinner as a celebration of what I have just invented.’ And then straight away he takes me by the arm and marches me quickly out the door and off we go over the fields and up into the big forest the other side of Haddenham which used to belong to the Duke of Buckingham, and in less than two hours we get five lovely fat pheasants with no more trouble than it takes to go out and buy them in a shop.”

Claud paused for breath. His eyes were huge and moist and dreamy as they gazed back into the wonderful world of his youth.

“I don’t quite follow this,” I said. “How did he get the paper hats over the pheasants’

heads up in the woods?”

“You’d never guess it.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t.”

“Then here it is. First of all you dig a little hole in the ground. Then you twist a piece of paper into the shape of a cone and you fit this into the hole, hollow end upward, like a cup. Then you smear the paper cup all around the inside with bird-lime and drop in a few raisins. At the same time you lay a trail of raisins along the ground leading up to it. Now-the old pheasant comes pecking along the trail, and when he gets to the hole he pops his head inside to gobble the raisins and the next thing he knows he’s got a paper hat stuck over his eyes and he can’t see a thing. Isn’t it marvellous what some people think of, Gordon? Don’t you agree?”

“Your dad was a genius,” I said.

“Then take your pick. Choose whichever one of the three methods you fancy and we’ll use it tonight.”

“You don’t think they’re all just a trifle on the crude side, do you?”

“Crude!” he cried, aghast. “Oh my God! And who’s been having roasted pheasant in the house nearly every single day for the last six months and not a penny to pay?”

He turned and walked away towards the door of the workshop. I could see that he was deeply pained by my remark.

Wait a minute,” I said. “Don’t go.”

You want to come or don’t you?”

Yes, but let me ask you something first. I’ve lust had a bit of an idea.”

“Keep it,” he said. “You are talking about a subject you don’t know the first thing about.”

“Do you remember that bottle of sleeping-pills the doc gave me last month when I had a bad back?”

“What about them?”

“Is there any reason why those wouldn’t work on a pheasant?”

Claud closed his eyes and shook his head pityingly from side to side.

“Wait,” I said.

“It’s not worth discussing,” he said. “No pheasant in the world is going to swallow those lousy red capsules. Don’t you know any better than that?”

“You are forgetting the raisins,” I said. “Now listen to this. We take a raisin. Then 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 my red capsules and pour all the powder into the raisin. Then we get a needle and cotton and very carefully we sew up the slit. Now.

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

“Now,” I said. “We have a nice clean-looking raisin with two and a half grains of seconal inside it, and let me tell you something now. That’s enough dope to knock the average mall unconscious, never mind about birds!”

I paused for ten seconds to allow the full impact of this to strike home.

“What’s more, with this method we could operate on a really grand scale. We could prepare twenty raisins if we felt like it, and all we’d have to do is scatter them around the feeding-grounds 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 trees by then, roosting, and they’d be starting to feel groggy, and they’d be wobbling and trying to keep their balance, and soon every pheasant that had eaten one single raisin would keel over unconscious and fall to the ground. My dear boy, they’d be dropping out of the trees like apples, and all we’d have to do is walk around picking them up!”

Claud was staring at me, rapt.

“Oh Christ,” he said softly.

“And they’d never catch us either. 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.”

“Gordon,” 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.”

“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, gazing at the sky.

“Two hundred’s the bare minimum,” he said quietly. “There’s really not much point in doing it unless we have two hundred.”

What is it now, I wondered. What the hell’s he trying to do?

“This is the last chance we’ll have before the season opens,” he said.

“I couldn’t possibly get any more.”

“You wouldn’t want us to come back emptyhanded, would you?”

“But why so many?”

Claud turned his head and looked at me with large innocent eyes. “Why not?” he said gently. “Do you have any objection?”

My God, I thought suddenly. The crazy bastard is out to wreck Mr Victor Hazel’s opening-day shooting-party.

“You get us two hundred of those pills,” he said, “and then it’ll be worth doing.”

“I can’t.”

“You could try, couldn’t you?”

Mr Hazel’s party took place on the first of October every year and it was a very famouS event. Debilitated gentleman in tweed suits, some with titles and some who were merely rich, motored in from miles around with their gun-bearers and dogs and wives, and all day long the noise of shooting rolled across the valley. There were always enough pheasants to go round, for each summer the woods were methodically restocked with dozens and dozens of young birds at incredible expense. I had heard it said that the cost of rearing and keeping each pheasant up to the time when it was ready to be shot was well over five pounds (which is approximately the price of two hundred loaves of bread). But to Mr Hazel it was worth every penny of it. He became, if only for a few hours, a big cheese in a little world and even the Lord Lieutenant of

the County slapped him on the back and tried to remember his first name when he said goodbye.

“How would it be if we just reduced the dose?” Claud asked. “Why couldn’t we divide the contents of one capsule among four raisins?”

“I suppose you could if you wanted to.”

“But would a quarter of a capsule be strong enough for each bird?”

One simply had to admire the man’s nerve. It was dangerous enough to poach a single pheasant up in those woods at this time of year and here he was planning to knock off the bloody lot.

“A quarter would be plenty,” I said.

“You’re sure of that?”

“Work it out for yourself. It’s all done by bodyweight. You’d still be giving about twenty times more than is necessary.”

“Then we’ll quarter the dose,” he said, rubbing his hands. He paused and calculated for a moment. “We’ll have one hundred and ninety-six raisins!”

“Do you realize what that involves?” I said. “They’ll take hours to prepare.”

“What of it!” he cried. “We’ll go tomorrow instead. We’ll soak the raisins overnight and then we’ll have all morning and afternoon to get them ready.”

And that was precisely 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 lane curved round to the right and ran along the crest of the hill towards the big wood where the pheasants lived. There was about a mile to go.

“I don’t suppose by any chance these keepers might be carrying guns?” I asked.

“All keepers carry guns,” Claud said.

I had been afraid of that.

“It’s for the vermin mostly.”

“A. li.

“Of course there’s no guarantee they won’t take a pot at a poacher now and again.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all. But they only do it from behind. Only when you’re running away. They like to pepper you in the legs at about fifty yards.”

“They can’t do that!” I cried. “It’s a criminal offence!”

“So is poaching,” Claud said.

We walked on awhile in silence. The sun was below the high hedge on our right now and the lane was in shadow.

“You can consider yourself lucky this isn’t thirty years ago,” he went on. “They used to shoot you on sight in those days.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I know it,” he said. “Many’s the night when I was a nipper I’ve gone into the kitchen and seen my old dad lying face downward on the table and Mum standing over him digging the grapeshot out of his buttocks with a potato knife.”

“Stop,” I said. “It makes me nervous.”

“You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yes, I believe you.”

“Towards the end he was so covered in tiny little white scars he looked exactly like it was snowing.”

“Yes,” I said. “All right.”

“Poacher’s arse, they used to call it,” Claud said. “And there wasn’t a man in the whole village who didn’t have a bit of it one way or another. But my dad was the champion.”

“Good luck to him,” I said.

“I wish to hell he was here now,” Claud said, wistful. “He’d have given anything in the world to be coming with us on this job tonight.”

“He could take my place,” I said. “Gladly.”

We had reached the crest of the hill and now we could see the wood ahead of us, huge and dark with the sun going down behind the trees and little sparks of gold shining through.

“You’d better let me have those raisins,” Claud said.

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

“No talking once we’re inside,” he said. “Just follow me and try not to go snapping any branches.”

Five minutes later we were there. The lane ran right up to the wood itself and then skirted the edge of it for about three hundred yards With only a little hedge between. Claud slipped through the hedge on all fours and I followed.

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

“This is spooky,” I said.

“Ssshh!”

Claud was very tense. He was walking just ahead of me, picking his feet up high and putting them down gently on the moist ground. He kept his head moving all the time, the eyes sweeping slowly from side to side, searching for danger. I tried doing the same, but soon I began to see a keeper behind every tree, so I gave it up.

Then a large patch of sky appeared ahead of us in the roof of the forest and I knew that this must be the clearing. Claud had told me that the clearing was the place where the young birds were introduced into the woods in early July, where they were fed and watered and guarded by the keepers, and where many of them stayed from force of habit until the shooting began.

“There are always plenty of pheasants in the clearing,” he had said.

“Keepers too, I suppose.”

“Yes, but there’s thick bushes all around and that helps.”

We were now advancing in a series of quick crouching spurts, running from tree to tree and stopping and waiting and listening and running on again, and then at last we were kneeling safely behind a big clump of alder right on the edge of the clearing and Claud was grinning and nudging me in the ribs and pointing through the branches at

the pheasants.

The place was absolutely stiff with birds. There must have been two hundred of them at least strutting around among the tree-stumps.

“You see what I mean?” Claud whispered.

It was an astonishing sight, a sort of poacher’s dream come true. And how close they were! Some of them were not more than ten paces from where we knelt. The hens were plump and creamybrown and they were so fat their breast-feathers almost brushed the ground as they walked. The cocks were slim and beautiful, with long tails and brilliant red patches around the eyes, like scarlet spectacles. I glanced at Claud. His big ox-like face was transfixed in ecstasy. The mouth was slightly open and the eyes had a kind of glazy look about them as they stared at the pheasants.

I believe that all poachers react in roughly the same way as this on sighting game. They are like women who sight large emeralds in a jeweller’s window, the only difference being that the women are less dignified in the methods they employ later on to acquire the loot. Poacher’s arse is nothing to the punishment that a female is willing to endure.

“,,. “C Ah-ha, Claud said softly. You see the keeper?”

“Where?”

“Over the other side, by that big tree. Look carefully.”

“My God!”

“It’s all right. He can’t see us.”

We crouched close to the ground, watching the keeper. He was a smallish 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 the peak of his cap, but it seemed to me that he was looking directly at us.

“I’m not staying here,” I said.

“Hush,” Claud said.

Slowly, never taking his eyes from the keeper, he reached into his pocket and brought out a single raisin. He placed it in the palm of his right hand, and then quickly, with a little flick of the wrist, he threw the raisin high into the air. I watched it as it went sailing over the bushes and I saw it land within a yard or so of two henbirds standing together beside an old tree-stump. Both birds turned their heads sharply at the drop of the raisin. Then one of them hopped over and made a quick peck at the ground and that must have been it.

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

Claud threw a second raisin into the clearing; then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth.

At this point, I saw the keeper turn away his head in order to survey the wood behind him.

Quick as a flash, Claud pulled the paper bag out of his pocket and tipped a huge pile of raisins into the cup of his right hand.

"Stop," I said.

But with a great sweep of the arm he flung the whole handful high over the bushes into the clearing.

They fell with a soft little patter, like raindrops on dry leaves, and every single pheasant in the place must either have seen them coming or heard them fall. There was a flurry of wings and a rush to find the treasure.

The keeper's head flicked round as though there were a spring inside his neck. The birds were all pecking away madly at the raisins. The keeper took two quick paces forward and for a moment I thought he was going to investigate. But then he stopped, and his face came up and his eyes began travelling slowly around the perimeter of the clearing.

"Follow me," Claud whispered. "And keep down." He started crawling away swiftly on all fours, like some kind of a monkey.

I went after him. He had his nose close to the ground and his huge tight buttocks were winking at the sky and it was easy to see now how poacher's arse had come to be an occupational disease among the fraternity.

We went along like this for about a hundred yards.

"Now run," Claud said.

We got to our feet and ran, and a few minutes later we emerged through the hedge into the lovely open safety of the lane.

“It went marvellous,” Claud said, breathing heavily. “Didn’t it go absolutely marvellous?” The big face was scarlet and glowing with triumph.

“It was a mess,” I said.

“What!” he cried.

“Of course it was. We can’t possibly go back flow. That keeper knows there was someone there.”

“He knows nothing,” Claud said. “In another five minutes it’ll be pitch dark inside the wood and he’ll be sloping off home to his supper.”

“I think I’ll join him.”

“You’re a great poacher,” Claud said. He sat down on the grassy bank under the hedge and lit a cigarette.

The sun had set now and the sky was a pale smoke blue, faintly glazed with yellow. In the woods behind us the shadows and the spaces in 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 suddenly and silently out of the dusk and he was only thirty yards away when I saw him.

“Another bloody keeper,” Claud said.

We both looked at the keeper as he came down the lane towards us. He had a shotgun under his arm and there was a black Labrador walking at his heels. He stopped when he was a few paces away and the dog stopped with him and stayed behind him, watching us through the keeper’s legs.

“Good evening,” Claud said, nice and friendly.

This one was a tall bony man about forty with a swift eye and a hard cheek and hard dangerous hands.

“I know you,” he said softly, coming closer. “I know the both of you.”

Claud didn’t answer this.

“You’re from the fillin’-station. Right?”

His lips were thin and dry, with some sort of a brownish crust over them.

“You’re Cubbage and Hawes and you’re from the fillin’-station on the main road. Right?”

“What are we playing?” Claud said. “Twenty Questions?”

The keeper spat out a big gob of spit and I saw it go floating through the air and land with a plop on a patch of dry dust six inches from Claud’s feet. It looked like a little baby oyster lying there.

“Beat it,” the man said. “Go on. Get out.”

Claud sat on the bank smoking his cigarette and looking at the gob of spit.

“Go on,” the man said. “Get out.”

When he spoke, the upper lip lifted above the gum and I could see a row of small discoloured teeth, one of them black, the others quince and ochre.

“This happens to be a public highway,” Claud said. “Kindly do not molest us.”

The keeper shifted the gun from his left arm to his right.

“You’re loiterin’,” he said, “with intent to commit a felony. I could run you in for that.”

“No you couldn’t,” Claud said.

All this made me rather nervous.

“I’ve had my eye on you for some time,” the keeper said, looking at Claud.

“It’s getting late,” I said. “Shall we stroll on?”

Claud flipped away his cigarette and got Slowly to his feet. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

We wandered off down the lane the way we had come, leaving the keeper standing

there, and soon the man was out of sight in the half-darkness behind us.

“That’s the head keeper,” Claud said. “His name is Rabbetts.”

“Let’s get the hell out,” 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 hedge.

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

We sat quietly behind the hedge waiting for the keeper to walk past us on his way home. A few stars were showing and a bright threequarter moon was coming up over the hills behind us in the east.

“Here he is,” Claud whispered. “Don’t move.”

The keeper came loping softly up the lane with the dog padding quick and soft-footed at his heels, and we watched them through the hedge 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 the wood if he knows where you live. He goes to your house and hides outside and watches for you to coniC back.”

“That’s worse.”

“No, it isn’t, not if you dump the loot somewhere else before you go home. He cant touch you then.”

“What about the other one, the one in the clearing?”

“He’s gone too.”

“You can’t be sure of that.”

“I’ve been studying these bastards for months, Gordon, honest I have. I know all their habits. There’s no danger.”

Reluctantly I followed him back into the wood. It was pitch dark in there now and very

silent, and as we moved cautiously forward the noise of our footsteps seemed to go echoing around the walls of the forest as though we were walking in a cathedral.

“Here’s where we threw the raisins,” Claud said.

I peered through the bushes.

The clearing lay dim and milky in the moonlight.

“You’re quite sure the keeper’s gone?”

“I know he’s gone.”

I could just see Claud’s face under the peak of his cap, the pale lips, the soft pale cheeks, and the large eyes with a little spark of excitement dancing slowly in each.

“Are they roosting?”

“Yes.”

“Whereabouts?”

“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 flashlights shaped like a fountain-pen. “You may need it.

I Was beginning to feel better. “Shall we see if we can spot some of them sitting in the trees?” I said.

“I should like to see how they look when they’re roosting.”

“This isn’t a nature-study,” Claud said. “Please be quiet.”

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

“I’ve just had a nasty thought,” I said. “If a bird can keep its balance on a branch when it’s asleep, then surely there isn’t any reason why the pills should make it fall down.”

Claud looked at me quick.

“After all,” I said, “it’s not dead. It’s still only sleeping.”

“It’s doped,” Claud said.

“But that’s just a deeper sort of sleep. Why should we expect it to fall down just because it’s in a deeper sleep?”

There was a gloomy silence.

“We should’ve tried it with chickens,” Claud said. “My dad would’ve done that.”

“Your dad was a genius,” I said.

At that moment there came a soft thump from the wood behind us.

“Hey!”

“Sshh!”

We stood listening.

Thump.

“There’s another!”

It was a deep muffled sound as though a 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?”

“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 a minute.

“Here’s one!” he called.

When I got to him he was holding a magnificent cock-bird in both hands. We examined it closely with our flashlights.

“It’s doped to the gills,” Claud said. “It’s still alive, I can feel its heart, but it’s doped to the bloody gills.”

Thump!

“There’s another!”

Thump! Thump!

“Two more!”

Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“Jesus Christ!”

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump!

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

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 two cocks and a hen. They were limp and warm, the feathers wonderfully soft the hand.

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

“Lay them here, Gordon! Just pile them up here where it’s light!”

Claud was standing on the edge of the clearing 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 around him 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 dumped 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 dumped them with the others. Then six more. Then six more after that.

And still they kept falling.

Claud was in a whirl of ecstasy now, dashing about like a mad ghost under the trees. I could see the beam of his flashlight waving around It’ the dark and each time he found a bird he gave a little yelp of triumph.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

“That bugger Hazel ought to hear this!” he called out.

“Don’t shout,” I said. “It frightens me.”

“what’s that?”

“Don’t shout. There might be keepers.”

“Screw the keepers!” he cried. “They’re all eating!”

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

“Keep searching!” Claud shouted. “There’s plenty more on the ground!”

“Don’t you think we ought to get out while the going’s good?”

“No,” he said.

We went on searching. Between us we looked under every tree within a hundred yards of the clearing, north, south, east, and west, and I think we found most of them in the end. At the collecting-point there was a pile of pheasants as big as a bonfire.

“It’s a miracle,” Claud was saying. “It’s a bloody miracle.” He was staring at them in a kind of trance.

“We’d better just take half a dozen each and get out quick,” I said.

“I would like to count them, Gordon.”

“There’s no time for that.”

“I must count them.”

0, I said. Come on.

“One.

“Two… “Three… “Four He began counting them very carefully, picking up each bird in turn and laying it carefully to one side. The moon was directly overhead now and the whole clearing was brilliantly illuminated.

“I’m not standing around here like this,” I said. I walked back a few paces 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 didn’t doubt it for a moment.

“The most my dad ever got in one night was fifteen and he was drunk for a week afterwards!”

“You’re the champion of the world,” I said. “Are you ready now?”

“One minute,” he answered and he pulled up his sweater and proceeded to unwind the two big white cotton sacks from around his belly “Here’s yours,” he said, handing one of them to me. “Fill it up quick.”

The light of the moon was so strong I could read the small print along the base of the sack.

J. W. GRUMP, it said. KESTON FLOUR MILLS, LONDON swi 7.

“You don’t think that bastard with the brown teeth is watching us this very moment from behind a tree?”

“There’s no chance of that,” Claud said. “He’s down at the filling-station like I told you, waiting for us to come home.”

We started loading the pheasants into the sacks. They were soft and floppy-necked and the skin underneath the feathers was still warm.

“There’ll be a taxi waiting for us in the lane,”

Claud said.

“What?”

“I always go back in a taxi, Gordon, didn’t you know that?”

I told him I didn’t.

“A taxi is anonymous,” Claud said. “Nobody knows who’s inside a taxi except the driver. My dad taught me that.”

“Which driver?”

“Charlie Kinch. He’s only too glad to oblige.”

We finished loading the pheasants, and I tried to hump my bulging sack on to my shoulder. My sack had about sixty birds inside it, and it must have weighed a hundredweight and a half, at least. “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 pitch-black woods, pulling the pheasants behind us. “We’ll never make it all the way back to the village like this,” I said.

“Charlie’s never let me down yet,” Claud said.

We came to the margin of the wood and Peered through the hedge into the lane. Claud

Said, “Charlie boy” very softly and the old man behind the wheel of the taxi not five yards away Poked his head out into the moonlight and gave Us a sly toothless grin. We slid through the hedge, dragging the sacks after us along the ground.

“Hullo!” Charlie said. “What’s this?”

“It’s cabbages,” Claud told him. “Open the door.”

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

It was all over now bar the shouting. Claud was triumphant, bursting with pride and excitement, and he kept leaning forward and tapping Charlie Kinch on the shoulder and saying, “How about it, Charlie? How about this for a haul?” and Charlie kept glancing back popeyed at the huge bulging sacks lying on the floor between us and saying, “Jesus Christ, man, how did you do it?”

“There’s six brace of them for you, Charlie,” Claud said. And Charlie said, “I reckon pheasants is going to be a bit scarce up at Mr Victor Hazel’s opening-day shoot this year,” and Claud said, “I imagine they are, Charlie, I imagine they are.”

“What in God’s name are you going to do with a hundred and twenty pheasants?” I asked.

“Put them in cold storage for the winter,” Claud said. “Put them in with the dogmeat in the deepfreeze at the filling-station.”

“Not tonight, I trust?”

“No, Gordon, not tonight. We leave them at Bessie’s house tonight.”- “Bessie who?”

“Bessie Organ.”

“Bessie Organ!”

“Bessie always delivers my game, didn’t you know that?”

“I don’t know anything,” I said. I was completely stunned. Mrs Organ was the wife of the Reverend Jack Organ, the local vicar.

“Always choose a respectable woman to deliver your game,” Claud announced. “That’s correct, Charlie, isn’t it?”

“Bessie’s a right smart 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 pubs. I saw Will Prattley letting himself in quietly by the side-door of his fishmonger's shop and Mrs Prattley's head was sticking out of the window just above him, but he didn't know it.

"The vicar is very partial to roasted pheasant," Claud said.

"He hangs it eighteen days," Charlie said, "then he gives it a couple of good shakes and all the feathers drop off."

The taxi turned left and swung in through the gates of the vicarage. There were no lights on in the house and nobody met us. Claud and I dumped the pheasants in the coal shed at the rear, and then we said good-bye to Charlie}Cinch and walked back in the moonlight to the filling-station, empty-handed. Whether or not Mr Rabbetts was watching us as we went in) I do not know. We saw no sign of him.

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

"Who?"

"Bessie-Bessie Organ." He spoke the name proudly and with a slight proprietary air, as though he were a general referring to his bravest officer.

I followed him outside.

"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.

Claud gave me a sly look.

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

"Yes," I murmured, "yes, of course."

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

I could just make out the small dot of a baby sitting high up in the pram, which had its hood folded down.

“There’s sixty or seventy pheasants at least under that little nipper,” Claud said happily. “You just imagine that.”

“You can’t put sixty or seventy pheasants 10 a pram.”- “You can if it’s got a deep well underneath it and if you take out the mattress and pack them in tight, right up to the top. All you need then is a sheet. You’ll be surprised how little room a pheasant takes up when it’s limp.”

We stood beside the pumps waiting for BeSS1C 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 bold as brass,” Claud said. “Good old Bessie.”

“She seems in rather a hurry to me.”

Claud lit a new cigarette from the stub of the old one. “Bessie is never in a hurry,” he said.

“She certainly isn’t walking normal,” I told him, “You look.”

He squinted 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 a tiny bit quick, doesn’t she?” he said carefully.

“She’s going damn quick.”

There was a pause. Claud was beginning to stare very hard at the approaching woman.

“Perhaps she doesn’t want to be caught in the rain, Gordon. I’ll bet that’s exactly what it is, she thinks it’s going to rain and she don’t want the baby to get wet.”

“Why doesn’t she put the hood up?”

He didn’t answer this.

“She’s running!” I cried. “Look!” Bessie had suddenly broken into a full sprint.

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

“X’hat’s up?”

He didn’t answer.

“There’s something wrong with that baby,” I Said “Listen.”

At this point, Bessie was about two hundred yards away from us but closing fast.

“Can you hear him now?” I said.

“Yes.”

“He’s yelling his head off.”

The small shrill voice in the distance was growing louder every second, frantic, piercing, nonstop, almost hysterical.

“He’s having a fit,” Claud announced.

“I think he must be.”

“That’s why she’s running, Gordon. She wants to get him in here quick and put him under a cold tap.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” I said. “In fact I know you’re right. Just listen to that noise.”

“If it isn’t a fit, you can bet your life it’s something like it.”

“I quite agree.”

Claud shifted his feet uneasily on the gravel of the driveway. “There’s a thousand and one different things keep happening every day to little babies like that,” he said.

“Of course.”

“I knew a baby once who caught his fingers in the spokes of the pram wheel. He lost the lot. It cut them clean off.”

“Yes.”

“Whatever it is,” Claud said, “I wish to Christ she’d stop running.”

A long truck loaded with bricks came UP behind Bessie and the driver slowed down and poked his head out of the window to stare. Bessle ignored him and flew on, and she was so close: now I could see her big red face with the mou 316 1 wide open, panting for breath. I noticed she was wearing white gloves on her hands, very prim and dainty, and there was a funny little white hat to match perched right on the top of her head, like a mushroom.

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

Claud let out a cry of horror.

The fool in the truck going along beside Bessie started roaring with laughter.

The pheasant flapped around drunkenly for a few seconds, then it lost height and landed in the grass by the side of the road.

A grocer’s van came up behind the truck and began hooting to get by. Bessie kept running.

Then whoosh! 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’re wearing off!”

Claud didn’t say anything.

Bessie covered the last fifty yards at a tremendous pace, and she came swinging into the driveway of the filling-station with birds flying up out of the pram in all directions.

“What the hell’s going on?” she cried.

“Go round the back!” I shouted. “Go round the back!” But she pulled up sharp against the first pump in the line, and before we could reach her she had seized the screaming infant in her arms and dragged him clear.

“No! No!” Claud cried, racing towards her.

Don’t lift the baby! Put him back! Hold down the sheet!” But she wasn’t even listening, and with the weight of the child suddenly lifted away, a great cloud of pheasants rose up out of the pram, fifty or sixty of them, at least, and the whole sky above us was filled with huge brown birds flapping their wings furiously to gain height.

Claud and I started running up and down the driveway waving our arms to frighten them off the premises. “Go away!” we shouted. “Shoo! Go away!” But they were too dopey still to take any notice of us and within half a minute down they came again and settled themselves like a swarm of locusts all over the front of my filling-station. The place was covered with them. They sat wing to wing along the edges of the roof and on the concrete canopy that came out over the pumps, and a dozen at least were clinging to the sill of the office window. Some had flown down on to the rack that held the bottles of lubricating-oil, and others were sliding about on the bonnets of my second-hand cars. One cock-bird with a fine tail was perched superbly on top of a petrol pump, and quite a number, those that were too drunk to stay aloft, simply squatted in the driveway at our feet, fluffing their feathers and blinking their small eyes.

Across the road, a line of cars had already started forming behind the brick-lorry and the grocery-van, 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. Any moment now, I thought, a large black car is going to come streaking along the road from the direction of the village, and the car will be a Rolls, and the face behind the wheel will be the great glistening brewer’s face of Mr Victor Hazel.

“They near pecked him to pieces!” Bessie was shouting, clasping the screaming baby to her bosom.

“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.”