February. It was time to catch up the pheasants.

George Purse bent down and picked up his boots from a newspaper which his wife had put down to keep the mud off the kitchen floor. Holding the boots in one hand he unlocked the kitchen door and stepped outside to put them on.

He stood on the doorstep and banged the boots together, and segments of dried earth fell from the tread of their soles like typeset from a tray. The noise woke up the dogs in their pen, and they appeared from their kennel in slow procession, the springer spaniel, the black labrador and the cross-bred terrier, stretching and snuffling, and yawning clouds into the cold morning air. The terrier was awake first. He rolled over and rubbed his back hard against the concrete floor, simultaneously kicking his back legs into the air as though trying to brace them against something solid. Growling with pleasure, he practised a few bites at nothing in particular, then he jumped up and shook himself so vigorously that he went stiff-legged and his pads kept vibrating from the floor.

George Purse sat down on the bench underneath the kitchen window to fasten up his boots. Overnight, the leather laces had dried stiff, and although this made them easy to thread, it
made them difficult to knot when he reached the top. Cursing the laces softly and passionately, he tugged hard and managed to tie a double bow in each one. But the knots had not jelled, there were spaces between them, and when he stood up, his head aching from bending over, his fingertips sore and already feeling the cold, it looked as though he had finally solved the problem with a couple of Chinese puzzles.

He looked up at the sky; it was a habit, a reflex action. What happened in the sky was important to gamekeepers. The weather and the birds which occupied the sky above their territories were important factors in their work. There was only one bird up there, a lapwing flying upwind, its broad supple wings carrying it easily through the north-east wind. George Purse saw it, identified it and forgot it. He was not interested in lapwings. They did not interfere with his work. Lapwings were not enemies of game.

He walked across the yard to let the dogs out for a run while he collected grain and water to feed the pheasants. The dogs were waiting for him at the door of the pen. He did not have to open it. As soon as he removed the lock they pushed their noses into the crack by the jamb and sent the door crashing back on its hinges. George Purse cursed them as they rushed past his legs. They came out in this way every morning, and he cursed them for it every morning. He inspected the hinges. They were still firm, but the jamb was splitting vertically above the top one.

The dogs sniffed and cocked their legs at familiar corners, then the springer and the labrador got their noses down and worked over the whole of the yard. The terrier just ran about wildly with his hackles up, barking. He kept running at the
other dogs, jumping at them and growling at their throats. The 
labrador ignored him. He just stood still, lifted his head out 
of the way and looked about him until the irritant went away. 

But the spaniel was less patient. He would tolerate two or 
three of these mock attacks then retaliate, snapping and snar-
ling the terrier into yelping submission on his back, pink belly 
exposed, front paws together at his chin. Dominance reasserted, 
the springer continued to quarter the yard. The terrier just 
jumped up and started all over again. This was what he was 
bred for, fighting. He was just as obdurate when put down a 
fox’s earth. Sometimes he would come tumbling out yelping 
with pain, an ear torn, his face gashed, or a patch of hair ripped 
from his back; but after a quick examination by the gamekeeper 
to check that the wounds were only superficial, he was always 
willing to run back to the blind fight down the stinking burrow. 

The labrador and the spaniel having systematically worked 
the ground between the outhouses and the cottage, left the yard 
and started to work in amongst the trees at the edge of the wood. 
The gamekeeper let the hens out into the yard, then unlocked 
the stable door of the adjoining outhouse, where he kept his 
feed and all the tools of his profession except for his guns.

He pulled open both doors to let the light in, and the clean 
whitewashed walls of the interior reflected the light, held it, and 
made it bright enough to use. The room was immaculate. Every 
object had its place.

Sacks of dog meal, hen meal and grain for the pheasants were 
stacked beneath the bench along the back wall. On the bench 
there was a box trap and two folded ferret bags, and on a shelf 
above the bench stood cans of vermin poison, and other cans 
and bottles containing medicine for pheasants.
Through the years, a succession of gamekeepers had hammered nails and hooks into the walls on which to hang their equipment. Some of these pegs had worked loose and were fragile through corrosion, and during his ten years at the job George Purse had knocked in several six-inch nails of his own. From one nail hung a selection of leather collars, leashes and rabbit skin dummies used in the training of gun dogs. From another, a dozen wire snares. A bunch of Fenn traps, suspended tautly by their chains, threatened their hook with extraction, and next to them, carefully coiled and tied, a long net, used for rabbiting. The gamekeeper’s waterproofs were hung directly above his wellington boots. On another nail hung a keep net and a fishing rod in its canvas sheath; and on the flagstones, beneath these nails, stood three buckets, two oil lamps, and in one corner, a rabbiting spade with a sharp worn blade.

The gamekeeper pulled open the mouth of a sack of grain, then fetched a bucket and started to ladle grain into it with an old enamelled jug. Load after load of teeming grain until the bucket was almost full. Then, there was such a squawk from outside that it made him jump, he jerked the jug, and grain spilled on to the floor. Furious, he hurried to the door.

The sight of the hens had been too much for the terrier. He had approached one, it had shied away, therefore he had been forced to chase it. When the gamekeeper reached the door of the outhouse the hen was still winning, just. Neck out, squawking, it strained forward with flailing wings. But its weight was unevenly distributed, the bulk of it was too far back for serious sprinting, and its action was merely a preliminary to taking off; which it did, every time the terrier snapped at its tail.
Each flight lasted two or three flaps, then it plumped down in a brown flurry and strode on again before the terrier could force it down and get its jaws across its back.

The gamekeeper let out such a roar after the terrier, the results of which could not have been more immediate if the reprimand had been physical. The terrier stopped the chase, looked back over his shoulder, then trotted away, eyes rolling for fear of something worse. It was time to join the other dogs in the wood. He would be safer distinguishing the scents of night visitors, and grumbling at their smells amongst the frozen leaves beneath the trees.

The racket had awakened the gamekeeper’s wife and children. The two boys looked out, then eased their way further into their warm beds. They knew by the degree of light in the bedroom that it was not yet time to get up for school. The gamekeeper’s wife tried to stay awake. She had to get up. Her husband would expect his breakfast to be ready when he returned from feeding the pheasants.

Before he left the yard with his bucket of grain and can of water the gamekeeper put the dogs away. He never took them with him when he went to feed the pheasants. He always went alone. It made the job easier. He could have made the dogs sit at a safe distance. And they would have sat. They would have sat until the frost stiffened their fur if he had asked them to. But without them there was less chance of the unpredictable; a sudden rabbit, a chase, panic amongst the pheasants and possible desertion from the covert.

He called the dogs from the edge of the wood and held open the pen door for them to go in. The labrador and the springer came straight away and walked in. The terrier appeared reluctant
to pass him, and he had to threaten it before it would come. Then it sidled up to the door, pretending not to look at him. He knew what it was going to do, and when it did rush past him, he was ready for it, and able to time a boot up the arse to help it on its way. He locked the door and looked at the split in the wood again.

‘The buggers,’ he said.

The gamekeeper picked up the bucket of grain and the watering can and walked across the yard towards the path which led to the feeding ride in the wood.

The smallholding was built in a clearing at the edge of the wood. The gamekeeper’s cottage faced outwards across arable land. Three fields away was the main road, which marked the boundary of the Duke’s estate, and across the road stood the houses and maisonettes of a new council estate. The back of the cottage faced the yard, and the outhouses, and directly behind them, the wood.

It was quiet amongst the trees. The loudest noise came from the gamekeeper’s boots crushing frost, and fracturing twigs and rigid blades of grass. As he walked he looked about him and listened. He was looking for signs of trespass; a partly eaten rabbit, a bunch of feathers or undergrowth flattened by poachers and their dogs. He was concerned with these signs, not out of compassion for the victims, but out of professional necessity to discover the killer. A rat? a fox? a stoat? a feral cat? or just a dog on the prowl? What could kill a rabbit or a woodpigeon, could do the same to a pheasant or a partridge. Whatever it was, it was an enemy of game.

As he walked he listened for bird calls. He did not know many birds by their songs. He had never had the patience to stand with binoculars and watch a bird singing, then imprint
the sight and the sound so that next time he heard those notes he could name the bird without looking for it. He knew them all by sight. He knew their flight, their habits and their habitat. On his rounds in the woods and fields he found their nests, their young and sometimes their bodies. He liked song birds. He did them no harm. They were not enemies of game.

The crow family was. Their harsh notes made him look upwards immediately. The rook and the crow, the magpie, jay and jackdaw were the gamekeeper’s enemies. They sucked eggs and ate pheasant chicks. They had to be destroyed.

But walking through the wood on this dun-coloured morning, the gamekeeper heard no crows and saw no suspicious signs. He heard the high bare branches combing the wind, and he saw a blue-tit searching the wrinkled bark of an elm tree for food. Nothing more.

Before he reached the end of the path, which formed a T-junction with the feeding ride, the gamekeeper started to whistle; a staccato, one-note affair, repeated over and over. It was a functional sound, he could have been whistling a dog. But the pheasants hidden in the undergrowth, already alerted by the footfalls, now knew whom to expect. The reared birds had been fed to that whistle from birth, and the wild birds had also learned to recognize that it meant food.

When he reached the end of the path, the gamekeeper could hear the pheasants scuttling around under the rhododendron bushes which lined the ride. Along the centre of the ride he had spread thick litters of straw. A car tyre had been sliced in half to provide two drinking vessels, and close by these feeding points, slatted boxes had been positioned ready for catching up the game.
The pheasants watched him from the cover of the evergreens. The overlapping leaves formed dense green canopies. It was dark and safe under there.

First, the gamekeeper refilled the drinking vessels. There was still water in them from the previous day, but it had been fouled, so he turned both tyres over and emptied them. He reverted the tyres, then refilled them from the watering can, pouring until the water overflowed and slid down the sides, making the rubber as shiny as seals.

He did not have to water the birds. There were numerous drinking places close to the wood. There were the drains and ditches around the fields. There were the two ornamental lakes, and the old fish ponds which used to supply the Big House. But George Purse looked after his pheasants; by watering in covert he minimized the temptation to wander. By keeping them close to home, they were less available to poachers who might be stalking the hedges and fields. His job was to keep the birds alive for the official killers, not to provide a meal for a fox, or a trespasser with a gun.

The gamekeeper picked up the bucket and began to walk along the ride, whistling as he broadcast handfuls of grain. He did not throw the food on to the mat of trodden leaves where the pheasants could easily see it; he threw it into the litters of straw where it immediately disappeared from sight. This was to make the pheasants work for their food, to make them scratch about and search the straw, to prolong their meal and keep them occupied. If the grain were just thrown on to the ground, the pheasants would quickly eat their fill, and then be off, foraging along the hedgerows, and across the nearby meadows.
The straw also made it difficult for other woodland birds to get at the buried grain. Gamekeepers use various feeding methods to try to keep the food exclusively for their pheasants. Some use hoppers made from cleaned-out oil drums. They cut three or four vertical strips near the bottom of the drums and stand them up on two bricks. The slits are just wide enough to allow the grain to trickle out when it is pecked by the pheasants. They make sure that the bricks do not protrude from underneath the oil drums, or other birds might perch there and scrounge a meal.

There are variations on this hopper. An inverted screw-topped drum can be used, with a small grille like a letterbox built into the lid. The drum is then secured to a post or tree at a height which allows the pheasants to walk underneath it and feed by pecking upwards, so that the grain trickles through the wire mesh. This precludes all small birds from feeding.

Birds of the crow family can be discouraged by hanging the body of a dead rook over the hopper, but even this draconian measure does not deter finches and sparrows, which when hungry, still try their best to eat.

The gamekeeper threw several handfuls of grain into the rhododendrons, and it rattled on their leaves like hailstones. He scattered food in and around the catchers, so that the pheasants, to whom these slatted boxes were as familiar as the bushes and the trees, would step through the doorways and feed contentedly inside.

The following morning, after he had baited the catchers, he inserted wire-netting funnels into the doorways. Then he picked up his bucket and watering can and returned home through the wood, leaving the pheasants feeding busily on the ride.
Some of the birds worked their way around the catchers, pecking and scratching for the grain amongst the leaves. They poked their heads between the slats to get at any grain they could reach inside, and then they approached the doorway to go in. But they balked at the funnel, they were unfamiliar with it. They strutted around the entrance, eyeing it. Some poked their heads into the funnel, and some even had a peck at the wire. But they would not go in to feed.

But, during the morning, when there was no grain left in the shrubbery, and it was hard work finding it in the straw, one hen pheasant ventured down one of the funnels for easy pickings inside. And during the afternoon, a second hen entered another one.

Once they were inside, and they had eaten all the grain, they did not know how to get out. They strode around the boxes poking their heads out between the slats. They jumped on and off the funnel, and occasionally tried to explode their way out by flying. One thing they did not do was walk out through the funnel, the way they had come in.

And they were both still there the next morning, when the gamekeeper arrived with his sack to carry any captured birds back to the laying pen.

The pheasants panicked as he approached the catchers. They ran two strides back. They pushed their heads between the bars as far as they would go, eyes staring, necks so taut that spaces appeared between the feathers, and the skin on their necks was visible. Then, as they withdrew their necks the bars backcombed the feathers, and they overlapped into place like a row of dominoes going down.
But the gamekeeper did not allow them to dash around for long, he did not want the birds to injure themselves. Injured pheasants were no good for breeding. He quickly bent down at one of the catchers, lifted it high enough to slot his other hand underneath and grabbed the bird across the back, clamping its wings to its sides. He stood up, holding the brown mottled hen in both hands to examine it for signs of disease or injury before placing it in the sack.

Its eyes were big and bright. It was well-feathered, and when the gamekeeper stroked one hand firmly down its back, the bloom came up on the plumage. He scuffed up the breast feathers to look for lice on the skin, spread both wings to examine the flights, then checked the legs and toes. He nodded. It had passed its medical; it was fit to breed. He opened the mouth of the sack and placed it inside. It would be quiet in there, it would not panic in the dark.

The laying pen had been built in line with the gamekeeper's cottage and allotment, along the boundary fence which separated the wood from the fields. It had been sited in the clearing so that the pheasants could get the sunshine, yet it was still close enough to the wood for the trees to take the sting out of the cold winds which blew from the north and the east.

The pen was made of rolls of wire netting six foot high, which had been nailed to posts spaced out to cover an area the size of a tennis court. Sheets of corrugated iron had been laid end to end around the bottom of the pen to give further protection from the wind and the rain. The more protection the pheasants received, the more reliable the egg production would be. Clumps of evergreen and conifer branches had been placed around the pen, some in the grassy central space, others
against the corrugated iron walls. These branches formed little
tunnels and retreats, which provided necessary privacy and
cover for the birds.

The laying pen had no roof. A roof was unnecessary because
the pheasants would be unable to fly out. They would have one
wing brailed before they were put into the pen.

The gamekeeper put the sack down in the yard, and walked
across to the outhouse where he kept his tackle. As he opened
the door he turned round and called across to the house,

‘John!’

He stood poised to enter the building, waiting for an answer.

‘John!’

‘What?’

‘Come here! I want you to give me a hand with these pheasants!’

‘I’m having my breakfast!’

‘Now! You can finish your breakfast when we’ve done!’

He went inside and walked across to the bench. He seized
the knob of the middle drawer and yanked it. It did not budge,
and this immobility jerked him forward against the bench. He
tried again, this time bracing his left hand against the bench,
and flexing his knees, his force directly in line with the pull.
The wood squealed. He pulled again. He could now get hold of
the sides of the drawer with his thumbs inside, and, jerking it
from side to side, he fought it open.

The drawer contained the leather brails and tapes, which the
gamekeeper fastened to the pheasants’ wings to prevent them
flying out of the laying pen. He had checked the numbers and
the condition of the brails the previous week, but apart from
that occasion the drawer had not been opened for months, and
the wood had swollen with the winter damp. The gamekeeper
picked out two brails and half a dozen paper fasteners, left the drawer open, and went out into the yard.

Two boys were crouching over the sack. Ian, the youngest one, was just untying the string to peep inside.

‘That’s it, Ian. Let the buggers out.’

Ian left the string alone, and both boys quickly stood up and stepped away from the sack.

‘We were only having a look, Dad.’

‘You’d have been having a look at summat else, if they’d have got out and taken off.’

Both boys were quiet, and thought about this. And although the threat remained unspecified, they were glad that the two pheasants had not escaped.

‘Anyway, Ian, you go back inside. I only want our John.’

The seven-year-old ran back a few paces, to where he could enjoy a tantrum in relative safety.

‘It’s not fair. I don’t want to go in. I want to watch. I want to watch, Dad!’

His wellingtons, his brother’s cast-offs, were too big for him, and when he jumped up and down they scarcely left the flagstones. His father advanced on him, and it was surprising how well-fitting his footwear suddenly became. Safe again, near the house, he began to stamp one foot, and his leg, sliding in and out of the wellington, was reminiscent of a bicycle pump at work.

The gamekeeper turned away from him and went back to the sack, where John was still waiting.

‘The young bugger. I’ll tan his arse for him when I get hold of him.’ He bent down at the sack and looked up at John.

‘I’ll get ’em out for you, John. You know how to hold ’em don’t you? Firm, but don’t squeeze ’em to death.’
John nodded. He knew what to do. They had moved here ten years ago when he was two. He had been brought up handling animals. He knew how to handle them when they were alive, and when they were dead.

His father untied the sack, reached inside and had one of the pheasants out before the other bird realized that there had been any chance of escape. He gave it to John, who took it cleanly, with both hands spread across its back to keep its wings closed. The hen pheasant looked big in the boy’s hands, and he had to hold it close to his chest to take some of the weight off his arms.

The gamekeeper took one of the brails out of his jacket pocket and prepared to attach it to the bird’s left wing. A brail is a leather fastener with two short straps and one long strap. All three straps have holes punched in them like a belt.

‘Right, John, let’s have hold of its wing.’

John shifted his grip to release the pheasant’s left wing. His father took hold of it, wrapped the two short straps around the bird’s wing just above its elbow, checked this loop for tightness, then pushed a paper fastener through the appropriate holes to secure it. This left the long strap hanging loose. He passed it underneath the bird’s wing, slotted it up between the end two flight feathers, then bent it back to meet the other two straps, and fastened them all together with the paper clip. It was like putting the pheasant’s wing into a sling. It stopped it from straightening its elbow, which meant that it could not fly.

The gamekeeper tried to bend the sharp ends of the paper fastener under the metal head to complete the job, but his big cold fingers did not have the necessary fine touch. During the operation on the bird he had not noticed that Ian had crept up close again to watch, and when he suddenly turned round and
shouted his name, the little lad thought he was going to cop it again, and he started to cry.

The gamekeeper laughed at the way he had startled the boy.

‘O, you’re there are you? Well, stop roaring, and go and fetch me them little pliers from the outhouse.’

Ian was away across the yard, as fast as his slobbing wellingtons would carry him. He was still small enough to go through the bottom half of the stable door and leave the top half closed.

There was the grind of a drawer being opened; then the sound of objects being moved around.

‘And I don’t want the pincers, or owt daft like that, Ian! I want them little pliers with the pointed ends!’

He underestimated the boy. Ian knew what he wanted. He knew the difference between pliers and pincers, and he quickly found the right tool.

‘Wonders’ll never cease,’ was all his father said when Ian handed them over. He bent the sharp ends of the paper fastener neatly under the metal head, checked the brail to make sure that the pheasant’s wing was not completely immobilized, then told John to take it up to the laying pen.

When John opened the wire-netting door and put the pheasant down, it ran away from him and tried to take off. Its right wing lifted it into the air, but without assistance from the other one, it overbalanced and came down on its left side. John stood in the doorway and watched a whole series of these lopsided take offs and landings. He did not laugh at the bird’s failure to fly; he watched its efforts seriously, concerned at its plight. He wanted to wait there until the bird had settled down, but his father called him away to help him brail the second pheasant.

When it was done, Ian wanted to carry the bird up to the
laying pen. His father said he would drop it. The little boy immediately began his dance, but this time, having overestimated his bargaining power on the strength of the successful pliers errand, he did not retreat first, and immediately received a skelp across the back of his head.

He ran across the yard, and into the house, crying. John carried the second pheasant up to the laying pen. But he had not time to stand and watch it, for he was immediately called away by his father for school.

When they got into the house, Ian was sulking. He would not look at anybody, and he was not talking either. He was sitting at his place at the kitchen table with his head down, taking it out of the fried egg on his plate. He attacked the yolk so viciously with his bread, that he even destroyed the yellow clot at the bottom, leaving the egg a mere raggedy-ruff beside the untouched rasher of bacon. He pushed the mess away from him and started to climb down.

At the sound of the plate sliding, and the chair legs scraping against the tiles, his mother turned away from the stove to see how much he had eaten. When she saw, she stayed his action with one hand, and pulled his plate back in front of him with the other.

'Finish your breakfast now, Ian, and stop being silly.'
'I don’t want it. I don’t like white.'
'You liked it until this morning. And what about your bacon?'
'I don’t want it.'
The gamekeeper sat down at the opposite side of the table to the boy.
'Just pop that bacon back in the pan. I’ll have it if he doesn’t want it.'
‘You would an’ all.’
‘Well, it’s no good wasting it is it?’
‘You’re not going to waste it, are you, love?’
And she tried to tempt him by cutting his bacon up into small stickable pieces.
‘It’s no good trying to force him, Mary. He’d eat it if he was hungry.’
‘I know, but he’ll be starving by dinner time if he doesn’t eat a bit more.’
‘It’ll serve him right. He’ll eat his breakfast tomorrow then.’
Mary Purse turned away to prepare her husband’s breakfast at the stove.
‘It’s all your fault, anyway.’
‘That’s it, blame me.’
‘You hit him, didn’t you?’
‘He should do as he’s told.’
‘He only wanted to carry a pheasant.’
‘He’s not big enough.’
‘You could have helped him, couldn’t you? Anyway, what could have happened? It was taped wasn’t it?’
‘What if it had broke loose, and we’d have been chasing it all over the yard? Pheasants have been known to go sterile when they’ve been scared bad.’
‘Don’t exaggerate, George. It’d have had plenty of time to settle down. They’ll not be laying for another couple of months.’
‘I’m not taking any risks, Mary . . . Anyway . . . look, am I getting any breakfast, or what?’
And that was the end of that.
Mary Purse made as if to continue the argument; then she shrugged and turned back to the stove. She sliced a tomato
into the frying pan, and the reaction of the juices on the hot fat created a furious energy, which jiggled the slices around, and produced a hissing sound like an angry cat.

John had brought a cat home once. He was five, just started school, and did not know any better. He did not know that his father was a gamekeeper.

A girl in their class had brought three kittens to school in a cardboard box, lined with an old red cardigan to keep them warm. Her dad said that if she could not get rid of them, he was going to drown them. Some of the children said they would like one, but they had already got pets, and their parents would not let them have any more. Some of the children said they would like one, but pets were not allowed in the new flats. John said he could have one. The teacher asked him if he was sure. They had got lots of animals at their house he said, a kitten would not make any difference. He did not mind which one he had. They were all nice. They were tabbies, with different-sized white bibs, and different-sized white socks on their paws. They all had blue eyes, and they seemed to smile every time they said mew. One of the girls said that the kittens could have her bottle of milk at playtime. Some more children said that the kittens could have theirs as well. Then the teacher said that there was no need to argue about it because there would be a spare bottle anyway; and she took the kittens along to the staff-room for the morning, so that they could get on with some work.

John took his kitten home at dinner time. He carried it down his jerkin to keep it warm. He kept running a bit and walking a bit, and every time he stopped running he looked down his jerkin at the kitten clinging on to his jumper.