

*For
Edward Anzac Strapp,
dab hand with canoe
or crabbing-net,
first-class climber and
life-long good friend.*



STORIES FROM
SUBURBAN
ROAD



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T.A.G. Hungerford

Thomas Arthur Guy Hungerford was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1915. He grew up in the South Perth area and served in the Australian army during World War II. After concluding his army service in 1947 he worked as a journalist, living in Canberra, Hong Kong, New York and Perth. He worked as a freelance writer after his retirement in 1967.

Tom Hungerford began writing in his late teens. *The Ridge and the River*, the first of his four novels, was published in 1952, and his articles, poetry and short stories have been published widely in journals, newspapers and anthologies throughout Australia and overseas.

His first collection of short stories, *Wong Chu and the Queen's Letterbox*, was published by Fremantle Press (then Fremantle Arts Centre Press) in 1976. Three collections of autobiographical stories with Fremantle Press followed: *Stories From Suburban Road* on growing up in Australia between 1920 and 1939, *A Knockabout with a Slouch Hat* about his wartime and immediate postwar experiences in occupied Japan and then Canberra, and *Red Rover All Over* about his experiences as a journalist from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Tom Hungerford died in 2011.

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King Bantam

I think she was quite the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Every rich amber feather was flecked at the end with chocolatey-brown, her shining russet hood covered her neck as far as her shoulders and her proud little black tail shimmered peacock-green every time she moved.

Half-a-dozen times on the way back from Ian's place I stopped and lifted the lid of the shoe box to stare raptly at my beautiful bantam hen.

She had one small defect. Her bright red comb and the little flaps of red skin beneath her beak, and much of her head, were completely covered with a hard, glistening helmet of stickfast flea.

When they got on the dog, as they sometimes did, I had to pull them off one by one with the tweezers my mother kept on the mantelpiece in the kitchen for pulling out splinters. It was slow work, and you had to be careful not to leave the head in or it might poison the dog. I felt it would take weeks to clean the hen up that way, and if they started breeding while I was doing it, I might be presented with another, never-ending, Saturday morning job. What was needed was something to finish them off in one fell sweep, forever. I comforted myself that my mother, who knew everything, would know what to do with the fleas. In my memory at least

she had never failed to come up with the solution to any of my problems.

Under the deep shade of the last street tree before reaching my home I stopped for the last time and lifted the lid of the box. For a moment before I did I pretended to myself that the hen had somehow got away, just to make even more tremendous the wonder of finding her still there when I lifted the lid, sitting still and so dignified in the pad of dried grass I had provided for her comfort. I said gently: 'Tuck! Tuck!' and without so much as moving her head she turned one bright eye up to me and replied, just as softly: *Tuck! Tuck!* I thought I would shout aloud for joy. She had messed in the straw, but that didn't matter. When I got home I would put her in the old cage the cocky had lived in until he had died — of the Lewdies, as my father's friend, Mr Bader, had said one night when they were playing cards. I was the only one who hadn't laughed. The cocky had been my friend for most of my lifetime. He had never been much of a talker, but when he was inclined he could whistle *Does-your-mother-want-a-rabbit-guts-and-all-for-ninepence*, and do a little jig to it on his perch. His old cage would do as a home for the banty until a yard of some sort could be run up for her.

Although I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, I had so longed for a bantam that I had even prayed for it. Every night before I jumped into bed I knelt on the mat and rattled off a ragbag of prayers I had assembled from what I had been taught at home and what I had heard others saying at the convent school I attended. I always

tacked on every *Oh Sacred Heart of Jesus I place my trust in Thee!* I could manage, gabbling as many as ten of them in ten seconds. I had been told at school that every time I said one it meant three-hundred days off my sentence to Purgatory — which was where I would be sent, I had decided, since I reasoned I was neither really wicked nor entirely good, although somehow different from the babies who had died without being baptised.

One night, having won myself a sizeable reprieve, I tacked on as an afterthought: *And please, God, let me have a bantam.* It seemed like a fairly reasonable request even though, of course, you weren't supposed to ask for things for yourself. You prayed for others, and others prayed for you. I made a permanent feature of my new prayer, and I got my reward.

Now two weeks after I began the prayer, when I went up to Ian's to play after my Saturday morning jobs, I'd been given the shoe box with six holes punched in the lid. And the bantam hen inside.

I put the end of one finger gently on the glittering, pointed little red feathers under her chin, and stroked them. She sat still as a stone. Only her eyes seemed to move, flickering with a sort of blue film as my finger moved. She made a soft gurgling sound of contentment in her throat and shuffled about in the grass. I stared at her entranced, but already with the ghost of a worry rattling its chains at the back of my mind.

You could never really quite know how my mother was going to take things, especially animals. She had been fond of the cocky, and she had really cried the

morning she took off the old overcoat that covered his cage at night, and found him lying on his back on the floor among the old seeds and cocky-dirt. She liked the dog and the cat, but not the magpie: she only let me keep it because when I brought it home it had had no feathers, practically, and she hadn't expected it to live. All the same, she had given me a good woollen sock of my father's for the little bird to snuggle in until it got some feathers, and she showed me how to chew up bread and milk and dribble it into the little magpie's beak.

She roared blue murder when I brought home the possum from a bird's-nesting expedition – twenty feet up a dead tree out the other side of Fremantle Road, very wild country, I had pulled my arm out of what had looked like a parrot's nest deep in the bough with the baby possum clinging to it, teeth and claws.

I had expected her to have a fit when it got into the belly of the sofa in the living room and scratched out all the sawdust, but in no time at all she had simmered down and was cutting up carrots for it.

Then I brought home my first pigeon, a lovely Blue Bar I got in a trade at school for two golf balls I'd found on the South Perth links. I settled it down in half a kerosene tin on the inside wall of the stable before I told my mother about it, and all she did in the end was to make a rule that I was never to bring home a cock bird – which of course had been my intention from the word go. Pigeons were not only very good to have, just to have them, but they were also good for swapping. When inevitably I brought home a cock bird she made a rule

that all the eggs must be broken. She forgot about it after a while, as I had known she would, and now there were forty or more Blue Bars picking up a living, somehow, around the yard and the stable.

It was touch and go every time I brought home a new animal, and there was only one way to find out what my mother would do about the bantam. I closed the lid of the shoe box, made a last rapt inspection through one of the holes, and padded off in the direction of home.

It was nearly lunchtime when I walked tentatively into the kitchen by the back door. My sisters were doing their music theory and my mother, even before she had dished up the lunch of bubble-and-squeak, was preparing stuffed flaps for tea. *Six lamb flaps, please, Mr Rogers!* I would say at least once a week at the butcher's. *And Mum says make sure it's lamb!* Eighteen pence for the six, plus a few coppers for the vegetables I fetched from the Chinamen's gardens, and we had enough for the whole meal with some left over for school lunches the next day.

'Where's Mickey?'

'He's gone down to the Zoo.' My mother pushed back her chair and wiped her hands on her apron. She had just finished the last of the flaps, which lay in neat little bundles in the baking dish beside her. 'He's helping with the ponies.'

I was consumed with envy. My brother was a school friend of the sons of Colonel Le Soeuf, who ran the Zoo. Saturday afternoons there were penny rides on the beautiful little Shetland ponies for which the Zoo

was famous, and often my brother was allowed to lead. Even, sometimes, to feed the monkeys and to clean out the cages and aviaries. It was just something he had, like his cricket bat and his football boots and his model yacht, and going away to Kalgoorlie at Christmas with the Young Australia League. And being older.

‘He’s not coming home for dinner,’ my mother said. ‘What have you got in that box?’

I held up the box and grinned at her confidently. This was the moment. ‘A banty,’ I said. ‘Ian gave it to me.’

‘Oh? He did, did he?’ My mother held out her hand, palm upward, and I placed the box on it. When she lifted the lid she took one quick look and pulled her head back sharply. ‘Good Lord! It’s covered with stickfast fleas!’ She held out the box, still opened. ‘Look! Did you know?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ I said, miserably.

‘No wonder he gave it to you. The nerve. You can take it right back to Mr Ian, with my compliments!’

‘Oh, no, Mum! *Please!*’

For once, unexpectedly, I was joined in a plea by my sisters. Ordinarily they would have stopped at nothing to thwart me. ‘Oh, no, Mum!’ they chorused in my wake, craning over her shoulder to look at the bantam. ‘She’s beautiful!’

‘I thought you’d be able to fix the fleas up, Mum,’ I said, cunningly.

‘Did you, now! Well.’ My mother looked closely at the bantam and said: ‘Tuck, tuck!’ When it said *Tuck, tuck!* back to her she smiled. ‘I don’t suppose another mouth’ll break us.’ Over her shoulder she said: ‘Peg,

bring me the dripping bowl out of the cooler. Lal, get the kerosene bottle. It’s under the sink.’ She turned to me, ‘Get me a little tin of some sort. Skedaddle!’

When everything was assembled she put a dab of dripping in the tin, poured a few drops of kerosene on it, and mixed it around with her finger. Then she took the hen from the box, set it gently on her lap, and smeared its head with the mixture. ‘There you are, banty,’ she said, when she had finished, ‘that’ll do ’til the doctor sees you.’ It was what she said to me whenever she pulled a splinter out of my finger, or gave me castor oil or put a Bates’ Salve plaster on a boil. She returned the hen to the box and handed it back to me. ‘You can’t keep her in that box, you know. What’re you going to do?’

‘I thought I’d put her in Cocky’s old cage,’ I said, ‘until I can ... sort of make her a bantam yard.’

‘Oh, yes,’ my mother said, ‘a bantam yard. I see.’ She seemed to be laughing behind her words. ‘Well, clean the cage out properly. We don’t want her dying of what poor Cocky had.’

‘The Lewdies,’ I supplied, and when my mother looked at me sharply: ‘You remember, what Mr Bader said that night.’

‘Whatever it was,’ my mother said. She seemed to be laughing again. ‘Put some nice clean sand in the bottom and some dried grass, and a clean tin with water. What are you going to feed her on?’

‘I thought she could have some of Ginger’s chaff,’ I said, hopefully.

‘*Ginger’s chaff!*’ my mother snorted. ‘What in the

name of God do they teach you at school these days?' She leant over to the dresser for the black leather handbag which always lay there, easy to the reach, and took out a sixpence. 'Your picture money for next Saturday night, don't forget,' she said, as she handed it to me. 'Duck over to Mr Faddy's and get sixpennyworth of wheat. And don't drag your feet. Two shakes of a dead lamb's tail and I'll be dishing up!'

That night after I'd gabbled my customary litany, I crept back out into the living room. The wonder of prayer and the way it had been answered had become too much for me to keep it to myself. I had to share it. My mother was sitting in the living room, doing what she called fiddling the books. They were spread out in front of her at the big polished jarrah table.

'Mum.'

'What is it?' She didn't raise her head. 'You're supposed to be in bed, Tommy-dodd. Up early tomorrow.'

'I've got a secret.'

She glanced up quickly. 'Have you, now. What is it?'

'I asked...' I stared at my toes. It was going to be harder than I had thought. 'I asked God to give me the banty. A long time ago. And he *did!*'

'Glory be to Holy Saint Denis!' my mother said, 'So we've got a blessed saint in the family!' She put a hand under my chin and raised my face to her own. 'Tell you what. You get down on your hunkers and ask him to let us win the Charities. Or we'll soon be in Queer Street.' She kissed the top of my head. 'You should be asleep by now, not worrying about God. Off you go.'

Once more between my sheets I lay thinking with some alarm of what she had said. The Charities I knew about, a sort of big raffle with a lot of money for first prize. We were always talking about winning it. But — Queer Street? I worried at it, trying to remember some street in South Perth called *Queer*.

And did it mean we were going to sell the shop? And shift? I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. The river and the polo grounds and the bush. And the Chinamen's gardens and the Zoo. And school, and all my friends. Perhaps Mickey would know. He was older. I raised myself on an elbow and peered across the room at the other bed. There was no movement in it. Mickey was soundly asleep.

I lay back against my pillow and tugged the covers about my neck. It was not in my nature to worry for long about anything, and soon I began to mull my way along other avenues toward sleep. On the very edge of it I remembered the Charities! I'd been going to pray for us to win it. Never mind. Tomorrow night would do as well. The shape of prayer in my consciousness changed gradually to the shape of the bantam, and my whole mind became a reflection of the little brown hen in her cage up in Ginger's stable. *Whatever happens*, I exulted, *whatever happens, I've got the banty!*

The day after her arrival the bantam hen was let out of the cocky's old cage, showing no sign of stickfast flea at all. She was perfectly at home from the first moment of freedom, and immediately all thought of building any

sort of yard for her was forgotten. When she was not scratching and clucking about the stable she would sit ruffling in the black sand outside the kitchen, where from time to time my mother, working inside, would chat affably to her through the wire door.

On the morning of the second Saturday after she joined the family my brother beckoned me into the chaff shed where he was preparing the breakfast feed for old Ginger and Bidly, the cow. 'Look behind the tea-chest,' he said, mysteriously, 'see what you'll find.'

The tea-chest, full of folded chaff bags, stood six inches from the wall of the shed, and I peered behind it. I didn't know what to expect because I was never sure what Mickey was up to. My heart leapt into my throat. In a little hollow in the sand and chaff of the shed floor there were four eggs, exquisite, golden brown, delicately rounded at one end and as delicately pointed at the other; not nearly as big as a chook's but twice as big as a pigeon's. There could be only one answer.

'The banty's?'

My brother nodded absently. He was looking at the eggs in a calculating sort of way. 'If you painted a ring of spots around the fat end,' he said, 'two sorts of brown, light and dark, you could swap them off as chicken-hawk's.'

'Don't you! They're mine, Mickey. When'll there be chickens?'

'Don't be dopey. You've got to have a rooster.' My brother, turned fourteen, stared past me at the open door of the shed. 'You've got a father, haven't you? Well.'

He picked up the kerosene tin he had been filling with chaff-and-bran, and put a dipper of pollard in it.

'Look up now, I've got to feed Bidly.'

I stood staring at the four eggs. A rooster. Of course. It was the pigeons all over again. A bantam rooster. I knew where there were plenty of them, but it would take some planning to get my hands on one.

The back fence of the South Perth Zoo, a mile or so from our home, abutted a quiet, well-bred street of substantial private houses in what we called 'the other end' — the posh part of the suburb.

I was hampered and annoyed by the presence of my sisters, Peggie and Alice. They had insisted on accompanying me when — inadvisedly in their presence, after lunch — I had asked my mother's permission to go to the Zoo. I had protested vigorously, particularly in view of my plan, but as always the last word had stayed with my mother. She could see no reason, she said, why just for that I couldn't bear to have the company of my sisters. And that was that.

'You go on down to the gate,' I told them, as we walked along the quiet street. 'I'm going to climb the fence.' I turned to Peggie, my older sister, who held the money our mother had given us — three threepences to get into the Zoo and three pennies to spend. 'You give me my fourpence, Peggie.'

'We're going to climb the fence too,' she said, as she handed it over, 'you can give us a bunk.'

'You can't! You're a *girl!*'

‘Don’t be stupid. I can climb better than you. I beat you up the lilac tree.’

‘That’s different.’ I didn’t like to be reminded of the defeat. ‘This is a *fence*, and *high*. And people’ll *see* you.’

‘Pooh,’ she said. She glanced up and down the street. ‘There’s nobody. Anyway, they don’t know us down this end.’ She started across the road. ‘Come on, Lal.’

I glanced up and down the street, as my sister had done. It was still, as if everyone south of the river had been sleeping off a heavy lunch. The hot afternoon air was heavy with the throbbing of doves and the scent of the gum trees shading the road. There was nobody, as Peggie had said.

I crossed the road and stood with my sisters at the base of the Zoo fence. It was six feet high with a single strand of barbed wire along the top. I felt uneasy, although not because of the climb. I had done it often enough before, and by myself I would have been up and over like a rat; I could see no point in parting with a hard-to-come-by threepence when you could get in for nothing. It was the girls. You never knew what they would do. What if they got stuck on the wire?

‘Oh, *Gawd!*’ I stopped and locked my arms about Peggie’s knees. As she drew herself up, her sandshoes giving her some purchase on the rough wood of the pickets, I straightened my knees and heaved. When I had raised her as far as I could I slipped my grasp down to her calves and repeated the lifting manoeuvre. That put her hands on a level with the top of the pickets, and from there she could raise herself and drop over to

the other side. I looked up to see how she was going. Directly above my head I could see her white bloomers, held by elastic just above the knees. If she had not been my sister I would have chanted the ritual: *I see a poppy-show all made of calico!* And if I had not been her brother she would have returned me, pertly, the ritual: *All clean and well paid for!* As it was I merely grunted: ‘Hurry up, Peggie! And mind the wire!’

Before she had negotiated her way down the other side of the fence I had bunked Alice to the top. I was already on the ground, inside the Zoo, when she dropped beside me. It was a spot where I had climbed the fence on other occasions, but I stood and looked about me cautiously. We were separated from the formal area of the Zoo by a surviving narrow belt of natural bush. I knew from past experience the free-roving peacocks nested there: even as we watched, breathless, one of the great birds minced primly past us, its coroneted head bobbing backward and forward in time to its fastidious strut, the folded fan of its splendid tail swaying heavily an inch or so from the ground behind it. The nearest animal yards—some camel paddocks, the elephant’s stockade and the lions’ enclosure—were quite some distance down a sandy slope, but you never knew when some nousey keeper might take it into his head to have a look around. The first thing, I assured myself, was to shake off my sisters.

‘I’m going somewhere. You two go somewhere else.’

‘We can’t,’ Peggie said. ‘We’ve all got to go home together. Mum said.’

‘Just tell Mum we got separated, or something. I’m not hanging around all the time with you.’

‘I’ll tell Mum you ran off and left us,’ Alice threatened. She was always the first to resort to tattling.

I took off down the slope. I knew I had her blocked. ‘You do, and *I’ll* tell Mum *you* climbed the fence!’ You had to fight fire with fire.

I detoured to visit the big tree where the peacocks roosted after dark, and picked up a fistful of orange-coloured wing feathers, and one or two long, lovely tail feathers, which the birds had dropped overnight. The nearby elephant’s stockade was empty, its occupant most likely down by the main gate giving rides to earn its keep. In the lions’ enclosure the biggest lion was crouched on the cement floor worrying a huge hunk of purple meat stuck with gobs of bright yellow fat. I knew horses were killed to feed the lions. Once I had heard the sound of a rifle shot from the yard behind the pens, and sometimes there was bloody water running in the gutter under the gate. I hurried past, revolted by the stench of death and lions’ dirt which clouded the whole place.

I knew exactly where I was going. I could have got there in a few minutes except that for my purpose there were still far too many people wandering the gravel paths among the enclosures.

I stood for perhaps fifteen minutes watching the crowds of tennis players on the grass courts, the girls all in white pleated skirts and most of the men in cream silk shirts and long cream pants: the few who wore

shorts got whistled at and had fun poked at them by the onlookers.

In front of the bandstand at the edge of the tennis courts I spent another fifteen minutes listening to the music of the RSL band, and watching four children who sat in the front row of wooden benches sucking lemons. All children I knew believed that it would make the bandsmen blow spit into their trumpets and I stared hopefully at the uniformed men on the stage, waiting for it to happen. I had tried it myself, and although I had never seen it work, I kept an open mind on it.

At the kiosk I spent a penny on four of the lolly-balls that changed colour as you sucked them. I watched the main storehouse for the animals’ food until I saw a keeper wheel out a barrow of carrots and lettuces, and disappear among the yards: then I ducked in and filled my pockets hastily with the monkeys’ shrivelled little windfall apples. They always tasted better than any other fruit I’d ever eaten. When I came out again there were no adults about—only a few children looking at the monkeys. I jumped the guard fence around the cages, and under their scandalised gaze, helped myself to whatever peanuts had bounced back off the bars.

I visited the snake house just to drop one of my monkey-apples onto the head of the crocodile, I knew he would be lying asleep in his sunken pool. He blinked and yawned and went back to sleep. Better entertainment promised at the python’s pit, where a stupid white hen, obviously unaware of its danger, strutted and pecked at the sand not six feet from those

dreadful rainbow coils. My nose pressed against the glass, I stood entranced for ten minutes, hardly daring even to suck my lolly-ball. Momentarily I expected the snake to lunge forward, as they did in the books I read, and engulf its prey. It did nothing of the kind. It lay on the sand, its horrible spade head motionless only inches above that shimmering hawser of flesh, its yellow stone eyes glaring malevolently at nothing. Finally I gave up and walked out into the avenue. It was getting late, and I decided it was time for me to do what I had to do.

'Now or never!' I muttered grimly to myself. It was the sort of thing said by the masterful schoolboys in the comics I read every week: I wasn't allowed to have them at home, but I borrowed them at school.

I stood with my chin on the middle wire of the fence around the buffaloes' yard, considering the situation. Grey and bald, like huge baby mice in a nest, the animals crowded in the farthest corner of the yard: only one, seeming asleep, stood beside the feed boxes alongside the shed under a spreading peppercorn tree. To get to the shed I would have to pass perilously close to it, but... I had watched the keeper walking among the animals, and they had never taken the slightest notice of him. Still, as I prepared to climb between the wires, I was not going to deny myself the pleasure of a spine-tingling thrill of terror over something I was absolutely certain would not happen.

The door of the feedshed was open, which was practically necessary to the success of my plan. As I had anticipated, crowds of bantams were wandering

in and out of it, scratching under the feed boxes and even between the legs of the dreaming buffalo. *The most beautiful bantams in the world!* I thought, covetously—bossy hens like my own banty, whole flea-packs of cottonreel chickens darting around, unbelievable roosters dripping with gold and amber and ivory. During so many visits to the Zoo I had mourned the seeming impossibility of my ever acquiring such a rooster—but I was to achieve my ambition so simply and so swiftly I would hardly have time to think about the risk attached to the kidnap.

To put off the moment of decision as long as I could I took out my lolly-ball and examined it. I'd reached the purple. I put it back, and with a last glance up and down the avenue, I stowed my fistful of peacock feathers on the ground at the base of the fence. Then I eased myself between the wires into the yard.

As I pelted across it the buffalo in the corner took absolutely no notice of me—if they even saw me at all, dreamily chewing their cud under the burden of their wide, murderous horns, they gave no inclination of it. The one by the feed boxes watched me, but made no movement. Only the bantams, when I was halfway toward the shed, took off in panic, flying like pigeons. Those nearest the shed darted inside, as I had hoped they would. I hurled myself after them and saw in an instant that a knot of them had crowded into a corner behind a leaning bag of chaff.

Almost automatically my hands fastened around a splendid rooster of black and gold lacquer, with an ivory

cowl and arching tail of iridescent green. *Oh*, I thought, staring at it in the dusty gloom. *You must be the king of them all!*

It struggled for a moment and then lay quite still in my grasp, its heart pounding against my palms. Straining it against my chest with one hand, I whipped a piece of string out of my pocket and tied its legs together. Then I unbuttoned my jacket and shirt, shoved the rooster in against my skin, and buttoned up.

My heart was pounding as hard as the rooster's when I turned to squat at the doorway. The buffalo in the corner, and the single one by the feed boxes, were still there and, it seemed, still completely uninterested in me. The avenue was still empty of people, and – more importantly – of keepers. Within seconds I was through the fence again, and had picked up my feathers. Within minutes, delightfully goosepimpled to think of the dangers I had faced and overcome, and congratulating myself heartily on having got away with it completely, I as well on my way to the back fence of the Zoo.

I had a shock coming to me. As I was padding along beside the high paling fence of one of the camel yards, with the back fence in sight, a gate opened about thirty feet ahead of me. A keeper wheeled an empty barrow out. He closed the gate behind him, and began to walk toward me. *Oh, gawd! Bugger-bugger-bugger!* For a moment I thought desperately of turning around and walking away along the way I'd come, but realised that would only arouse the keeper's suspicions. I kept plodding forward, my premonition of impending

disaster heightened by a sudden wriggling against my ribs. Luckily my jacket was a hand-me-down from Mickey, still too big for me, and the movement wouldn't be too easy to detect. Nevertheless I kept my hand in my pocket and pressed my arm against the rooster to keep it as quiet as possible.

As I drew alongside the barrow the keeper said: 'A bit late for you to be leaving the Zoo, sonny!'

'I'm just going home.'

'You're taking a funny way to the gate, then!'

'I wanted to see if I could find some more of these.' With my free hand I raised my fistful of feathers, and the rooster squirmed more imperatively against my side. I froze. 'I was going by the peacock tree.'

'The peacock tree?'

'That big gum tree up by the elephant's yard. The peacocks go up it at night, I reckon. You always find some feathers there.'

'Let me see those, sonny!' The keeper held out his hand for the feathers. 'Did you know boys have been catching peacocks and pulling the feathers out of their tails?' He had been examining the ends of the feathers closely as he spoke, but suddenly he looked up into my face. 'You don't do that, do you?'

'Oh, *no!*' I was really shocked, and I think it might have shown in my voice. 'I only *pick* them *up*, like at the peacock tree!'

'All right then.' The keeper handed back my feathers. 'Off you go – no, wait a minute!' My arm against the wriggling rooster, I froze again. 'When you go out the

gate you can do something for me. You know Miss Le Soeuf? Good. Then tell her Keeper Hope said one of the camels in the top yard looks a bit down on it. She better tell the Colonel. Remember that?’

‘One-of-the-camels-in-the-top-yard-looks-a-bit-down-on-it-and-she’d-better-tell-the-Colonel!’ I gabbled. I could hardly contain my longing to be outside the Zoo fence and on my way home safely, with my rooster. It would be dreadful to get so far and then be tripped up some little thing. ‘I’ll tell Miss Le Soeuf, Mr Hope!’

‘Good lad. Here’s something for your trouble.’

The keeper took a thrippenny bit out of the pocket and handed it to me. Half of next Saturday night’s picture money already, and here it was, only Sunday! But what could you do with one hand full of feathers and the other jammed in your pocket to keep the rooster from jumping around?

‘Thank you, Mr Hope — but I couldn’t take it.’ I tried to make it sound as if I didn’t care very much for money at all. ‘Mum and Dad don’t let us.’

‘Well, then — you’re a good boy to do as you’re told,’ the keeper said. ‘Off you go.’

I hadn’t gone ten yards from the Zoo gates before I’d opened my jacket and my shirt to let the rooster look out. He seemed quite comfortable, although very watchful. The warmth of him nestled against my side made the long walk home seem shorter. Also I was buoyed up by a feeling of virtue at having refused the keeper’s thrippence: by the time I reached our own back

gate I’d almost convinced myself that only obedience to my parents’ wishes had stopped me from pocketing it.

As I turned into our backyard the river at the bottom of the road was already getting dark, and chips of yellow were beginning to wink here and there along the flat grey shape of the city on the other side. Light spilled from our back door, and I knew that my mother would be at the stove inside, cooking something for our tea. I could hear one of my sisters doing her practice at the piano: Peg, because Alice could only play one piece, over and over, and it wasn’t the one I could hear. I knew Alice would be in their bedroom devouring one of the comics for which she traded part of her lunch, or her lunch money, at school. My father would be sitting in his chair reading the *Sunday Times*, and Mickey would be sprawled on the floor varnishing his model yacht again, or fiddling with his egg collection, or making a shanghai: he was always doing something by himself. It was nice to stand outside for a moment and think that none of them knew what I had done, or that I was going to give them the surprise of their lives.

At the same time there were problems, and I had to do some planning. I would be in for it, for sure, for being late, and perhaps also for having gone off and left Peg and Alice at the Zoo — although I hoped my own threat to them might have blocked their usual treachery. And there was the matter of the cow’s grass and the morning’s wood, but I reckoned Mickey could have cut the cow’s grass and brought in the wood. In any case it wouldn’t hurt fat Bidy to make do on her chaff-and-bran, for

once – and Mickey would have fixed that too, by now. Boil it all down and there was really only the rooster to explain, and straightaway I thought of a good way to do it. I would just tell them the plain truth. It was brilliant!

I saw him in one of the yards, and I just climbed over the fence and caught him, Mum, I would say. I tried it out aloud, but softly, for effect. It sounded good. The rooster, disturbed by my voice, shifted against my side. It cocked its head and looked up at me, questioningly. Nobody saw me, and the Zoo's got simply thousands of them, Dad, I would say, and they would look at the new bantam and be overcome by its beauty. As I had been. And for good measure bring in my brother, who seemed never to be able to do anything wrong. Mickey said we had to have a rooster for the banty to get chickens, Mum! I considered it, and it sounded wonderful. Even watertight.

They'd hardly send me back with the rooster tonight, I thought. And I couldn't see my father harnessing up old Ginger and driving right down to the Zoo himself. And by tomorrow night they'd have forgotten they'd ever been without the rooster. He'd have settled in, and become one of the family like the banty. *And even if I get a hiding for being late home, and not getting the wood in, and not cutting Biddy's grass, and for stealing, it'll be worth it!*

I pulled the rooster from inside my shirt, gently, so as not to make him squawk and spoil the surprise. I held him up only inches from my nose, and stared at him rapturously. He stared at me as if he knew me already. His comb was like coral and his eyes were like painted

glass, and the fading light flowed like coloured water over his glorious plumage.

'Oh, you're the *king!*' I whispered to him, and he blinked at me. 'That's what I'm going to call you. *King!*'

I tucked him securely under my arm, unlatched the gate, closed it behind me, and trotted across the yard toward our back door.