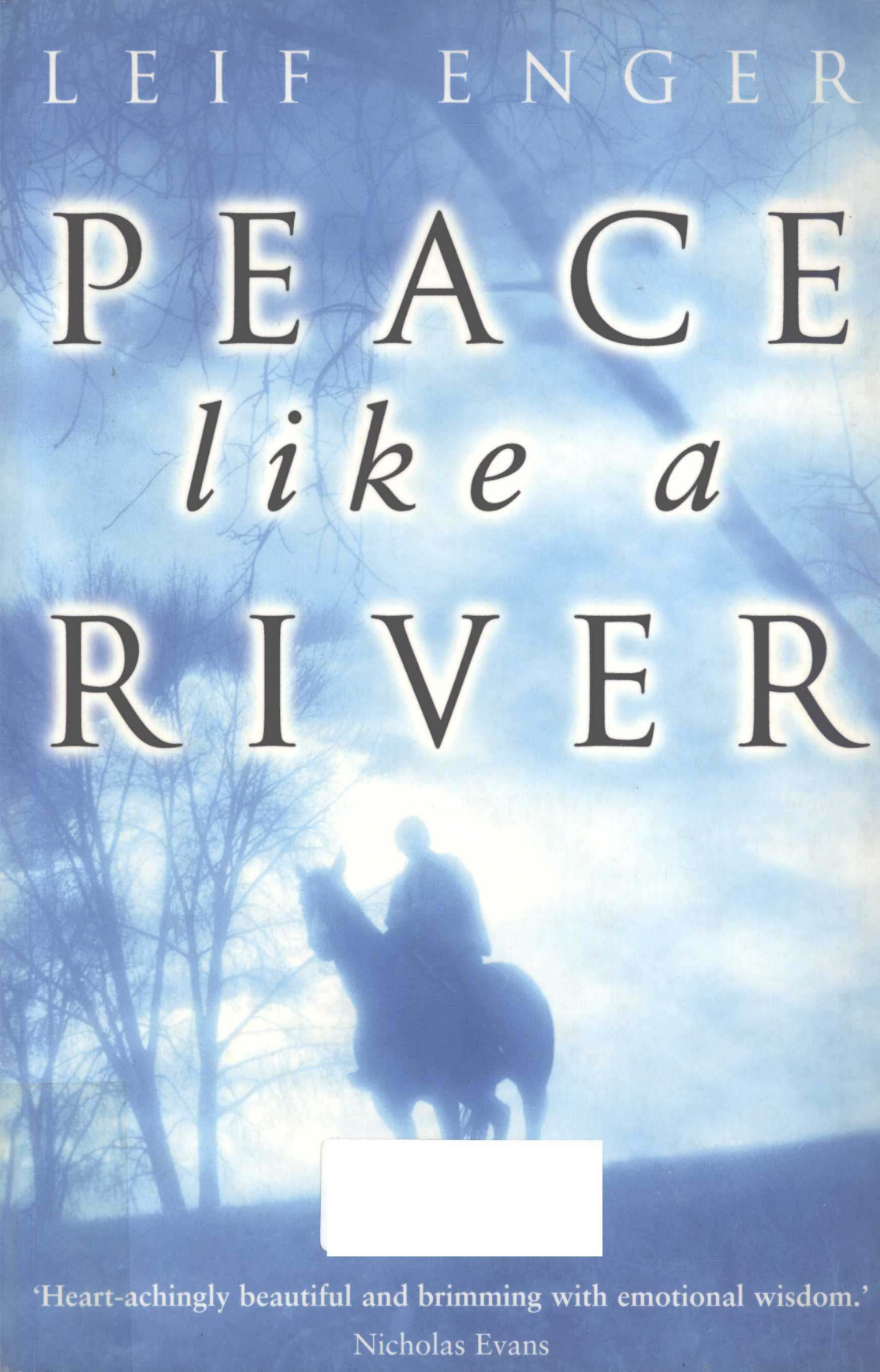
LEIF ENGER

PEACE *like a* RIVER



'Heart-achingly beautiful and brimming with emotional wisdom.'

Nicholas Evans

Peace Like a River

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To Robin

The country ahead is as wild a spread
As ever we're likely to see

The horses are dancing to start the advance—
Won't you ride on with me?

Peace Like a River

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Clay

FROM MY FIRST BREATH IN THIS WORLD, ALL I WANTED WAS A GOOD SET OF lungs and the air to fill them with—given circumstances, you might presume, for an American baby of the twentieth century. Think about your own first gasp: a shocking wind roweling so easily down your throat, and you still slipping around in the doctor's hands. How you yowled! Not a thing on your mind but breakfast, and that was on the way.

When I was born to Helen and Jeremiah Land, in 1951, my lungs refused to kick in.

My father wasn't in the delivery room or even in the building; the halls of Wilson Hospital were close and short, and Dad had gone out to pace in the damp September wind. He was praying, rounding the block for the fifth time, when the air quickened. He opened his eyes and discovered he was running—sprinting across the grass toward the door.

"How'd you know?" I adored this story, made him tell it all the time.

"God told me you were in trouble."

"Out loud? Did you hear Him?"

"Nope, not out loud. But He made me run, Reuben. I guess I figured it out on the way."

I had, in fact, been delivered some minutes before. My mother was dazed, propped against soggy pillows, unable to comprehend what Dr. Animas Nokes was telling her.

"He still isn't breathing, Mrs. Land."

"Give him to me!"

To this day I'm glad Dr. Nokes did not hand me over on demand. Tired as my mother was, who knows when she would've noticed? Instead he laid me down and rubbed me hard with a towel. He pounded my back; he rolled me over and massaged my chest. He breathed air into my mouth and nose—my chest rose, fell with a raspy whine, stayed fallen. Years later Dr. Nokes would tell my brother Davy that my delivery still disturbed his sleep. He'd never seen a child with such swampy lungs.

When Dad skidded into the room, Dr. Nokes was sitting on the side of the bed holding my mother's hand. She was wailing—I picture her as an old woman here, which is funny, since I was never to see her as one—and old Nokes was attempting to ease her grief. It was unavoidable, he was saying; nothing could be done; perhaps it was for the best.

I was lying uncovered on a metal table across the room.

Dad lifted me gently. I was very clean from all that rubbing, and I was gray and beginning to cool. A little clay boy is what I was.

"Breathe," Dad said.

I lay in his arms.

Dr. Nokes said, "Jeremiah, it has been twelve minutes."

"Breathe!" The picture I see is of Dad, brown hair short and wild, giving this order as if he expected nothing but obedience.

Dr. Nokes approached him. "Jeremiah. There would be brain damage now. His lungs can't fill."

Dad leaned down, laid me back on the table, took off his jacket and wrapped me in it—a black canvas jacket with a quilted lining, I have it still. He left my face uncovered.

"Sometimes," said Dr. Nokes, "there is something unworkable in one of the organs. A ventricle that won't pump correctly. A liver that poisons the blood." Dr. Nokes was a kindly and reasonable man. "Lungs that can't expand to take in air. In these cases," said Dr. Nokes, "we must trust in the Almighty to do what is best." At which Dad stepped across and smote Dr. Nokes with a right hand, so that the doctor went down and lay on his side with his pupils unfocused. As

Mother cried out, Dad turned back to me, a clay child wrapped in a canvas coat, and said in a normal voice, "Reuben Land, in the name of the living God I am telling you to breathe."

The truth is, I didn't think much on this until a dozen years later—beyond, of course, savoring the fact that I'd begun life in a dangerous and thus romantic manner. When you are seven years old there's nothing as lovely and tragic as telling your friends you were just about dead once. It made Dad my hero, as you might expect, won him my forgiveness for anything that he might do forever; but until later events it didn't occur to me to wonder just why I was allowed, after all, to breathe and keep breathing.

The answer, it seems to me now, lies in the miracles.

Let me say something about that word: miracle. For too long it's been used to characterize things or events that, though pleasant, are entirely normal. Peeping chicks at Easter time, spring generally, a clear sunrise after an overcast week—a *miracle,* people say, as if they've been educated from greeting cards. I'm sorry, but nope. Such things are worth our notice every day of the week, but to call them miracles evaporates the strength of the word.

Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature. It's true: They rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in. Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave—now there's a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time. When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up. A miracle contradicts the will of earth.

My sister, Swede, who often sees to the nub, offered this: People fear miracles because they fear being changed—though ignoring them will change you also. Swede said another thing, too, and it rang in me like a bell: No miracle happens without a witness. Someone to declare, Here's what I saw. Here's how it went. Make of it what you will.

The fact is, the miracles that sometimes flowed from my father's fingertips had few witnesses but me. Yes, enough people saw enough strange things that Dad became the subject of a kind of misspoken

folklore in our town, but most ignored the miracles as they ignored Dad himself.

I believe I was preserved, through those twelve airless minutes, in order to be a witness, and as a witness, let me say that a miracle is no cute thing but more like the swing of a sword.

If he were here to begin the account, I believe Dad would say what he said to Swede and me on the worst night of all our lives:

We and the world, my children, will always be at war.

Retreat is impossible.

Arm yourselves.

His Separate Shadow

I NOW THINK OF MY SURVIVAL AS MY FATHER'S FIRST MIRACLE. DR. NOKES himself named the event miraculous once he woke up and washed his face and remembered who he was.

The second, I suppose, is that the doctor turned out wrong about the brain damage. I'm happy to say none surfaced until I entered tenth grade and signed up for Plane Geometry; but since I can still feed myself and grind out a sentence in English, you won't hear me complain.

Dad's third miracle—and one of the most startling, if not consequential—happened in the middle of the night, in the middle of North Dakota, just after I turned eleven.

It was the trip I shot my first goose, a medium-sized snow. We were staying at August Shultz's place, four hours west onto the Great Plains, hunting near the homestead Dad grew up on and still quietly longed for. The goose was a joyous occasion, and for a while we could all speak to each other again. That is, Dad and Davy could speak again—Swede and I rarely quarreled, for I never held opinions in those days, and hers were never wrong.

I do remember that the tension in the car, going out, was so potent I fell asleep as soon as I was able. A veteran bystander to hard moments, I knew they went by quicker when you were unconscious. Davy was sixteen then, a man as far as I was concerned, with a driver's license and a knockout four-inch scar down his right forearm and

Dad's own iron in his spine. That night they sat in the front seat of the Plymouth, green-gilled from the dashlights, not speaking at all.

We were late getting started, as happened often, because Dad had to lock up the school after the football game. Swede and I yawned in the back seat, boxes of shotgun shells stacked at our feet. The sky spat ice and water. It rode up on the windshield, and from time to time Dad pulled over so Davy could jump out and scrape it off. That Plymouth had a worthless heater. Swede and I rode cocooned in gray army blankets and stocking caps, the two of us scratchy as horsehair. Twenty miles into the trip she slipped off her rubber boots; then I felt her toes creep up against my hip. Oh, but they were cold. I pulled them into my lap and rubbed them while up front Davy opened a thermos, poured coffee into the lid, and without looking at Dad handed it over.

Still not a word between them. The road beat backward under us. In a few minutes Swede's toes felt warm and she was breathing evenly through her nose. I kept my hands tented over her feet, pigeon-toed there in my lap, laid my head back against the seat, and slipped away as well.

Before dawn we settled among decoys in one of August's barley fields. Dad and Swede lay on their elbows side by side, the two of them whispering under a swath. Davy and I took the opposite flank, he with his clawed-up Winchester goose gun. I was too young to shoot, of course, and so was Swede; we were there purely, as she said, "for seasoning." In all the years since I don't remember a colder morning afield. Rain can outfreeze snow. We lay between soaked ground and soaked swaths with a December-smelling wind coming over our backs. As the sky lightened we heard geese chuckling on the refuge away to the east. The rag decoys puffed and fluttered. I yawned once, then again so hard my ears crackled.

Davy said, "Don't go to sleep on me now, buddy."

He could say it; he wasn't cold. Though his gloves were nothing but yellow cotton, he could handle an icy shotgun in evident comfort. I had on his outgrown leather mitts with two pair of wool liners,

yet my fingers were clenched and bloodless. It seemed to get colder as the day came on. When Davy said, softly, "Old Rube, I could live out here, couldn't you?" I was too frozen to tell him yes.

Minutes later I woke: Davy was poking me in the side. Finger to his lips, he nodded east. A lone snow goose was approaching, fighting the wind, making low questioning honks at our flock of rags. I put my face against the ground, trying not to move—a goose is an easy bird to spook. The loner's honks got louder and more confident as it decided to land for breakfast. It was utterly fooled. I'd actually started feeling sorry for the doomed bird when Davy grabbed my shoulder and spun me so I lay on my back. He jammed the Winchester into my hands.

"Take him, Rube."

The goose was straight overhead. Not twenty feet high! I flung off a mitten and tried to aim. The gun was way too big but I balanced it out there and yanked the trigger. Nothing happened—something was stuck—then Davy's hand zipped out and clicked the safety off. The goose was just beyond us but still so close I could hear its panting wings. I yanked again, shot wild, and the recoil slammed my shoulder into the mud. My ears rang high and clear, and the goose finally understood and tilted off to the left while I pumped another shell into the chamber and fired again. The goose still didn't fold but caught the wind and sailed over the barley like a kite. Tears were in my eyes—I'd missed two easy shots and wasted Davy's present to me. Blind with despair I fired again. The goose had to be out of range; yet somehow it shuddered, went graceless, and made a controlled fall to the ground some eighty yards away. "You did it," Davy said. "Good shot—you took him the hard way, buddy. Better go finish him."

But as I handed him the gun, almost sobbing with relief, Swede streaked past in her corduroy coat yelling, "I'll get 'im, I'll get 'im!" and Davy said, "Aw, let her chase the old bird down," so I watched her go, yellow hair bouncing behind her stocking cap.

Downfield, though, the goose seemed to have recovered its wits. It stood upright, taking stock, its head so high and perky I feared it might take off and fly after all. When it saw Swede coming it turned and sprinted away.

I'm telling you that goose could run.

Seeing this Swede lowered her head and went full steam, mud and chaff raining off her bootsoles. Dad started laughing, whipping off his cap and whacking it on his leg, while the goose stretched out its neck and bolted across the barley. Reaching the end of the field it encountered a barbwire fence. It stopped and turned as Swede closed in.

Did you ever see an angry goose up close? It's a different bird from those you've watched flying south or waddling in city parks. An adult goose in a wrathful mood can stand up and look a third-grader right in the eye, and that's what this fellow did to Swede. She got within a yard and stopped cold. She'd seen Dad wring a few goose necks and understood the technique, but those had been badly wounded, pathetic creatures—they'd seemed almost grateful to get it done with. This goose still owned its spirit. Later Swede told me she felt numb, standing there with her hand out; the goose had one blind, clouded eye, plenty eerie in itself, but Swede said the good eye was worse. She looked into that good eye and saw a decision being reached.

"It decided to kill me," she said.

From where we stood, though, all we saw was the goose raise its wings and poke its beak at Swede. She spun, slipped to one knee, then was up and shutting the distance between us. The terrifying part, for her, must've been glancing back and seeing that goose coming after her just as hard as it could, wings spread, its black beak pointed at her rump. Dad was laughing so hard he was bent clear over and finally had to sit down on a gunnysack wiping his eyes. Swede led the bird straight toward us, and when she pounded past, Davy leaned over and snagged it just behind the head. A quick twist and he handed it to me, wings quivering. He grinned. "All yours, Natty"—after Natty Bumppo, Mr. Fenimore's matchless hunter. It was a heavy goose. I realized I was warm, standing there with my mitts off, even hot. I held my goose with one hand and Davy's Winchester in the other, smelling gunpowder and warm bird, feeling something brand-new and liking it quite a bit. Swede, though, was crying, her face in Dad's belly, even while he laughed helplessly on.

* * *

Swede felt bad about that goose for a long time. For an eight-year-old girl she put enormous stock in courage. To be routed across a barley field by an incensed goose gave her doubts about her character.

"He's really a big one, look at him," I said, once we were back at August's farm doing the job you might expect; behind the barn was a hand pump and an old door set across a stock tank for a cleaning table.

Davy was whetting the blade of his hunting knife, a bone-handled Schrade. He said, "You want me to show you how?"

"I shot him, I'll clean him." I had no urge to actually gut the bird, but I was eleven and a hunter now—a man just beginning his span of pride.

He gave me the knife, handle first. "Don't forget to thumb out the gizzard. We don't want sandy gravy, uh?"

As he strode away I noticed how the clouds had racked up, thick and low, and how the light was going though it wasn't yet noon. Maybe this affected me, or maybe it was just the thought of cleaning that goose by myself, but I sure wanted Davy to stay.

"I'll save out the heart for you," I called after him, and he turned and smiled, then climbed a low ridge of cottonwood and willow brush and disappeared.

I had, of all things, a lump in my throat. Luckily Swede was standing at my elbow and said, "First thing, you have to cut his head off."

"Well, I know that."

She prodded the goose with her finger; plucked, it looked pimply and regretful.

"Then the wings," she said.

"You want to clean him?"

Swede let it go and stepped over to the ruins of a grain truck that had been parked behind the barn to rot. She shinnied up the big rumplike fender and sat there with the wind tugging her hair. It was a cutting wind; the light was leaking from a mottled yellow sky. Imagine a sick child all jaundiced and dirty about the cheeks—that's how the sky looked. I picked up Davy's knife and tried it against my thumb, then beheaded the snow.

Watching, Swede said, "Forgive me running, Rube?"

"What?"

"I ran away."

"From the goose? Swede, it wasn't any big deal." I tossed the head into a cardboard box we'd found in the barn and went to work on the wings. They came off a lot harder than the head; I had to saw the knife blade back and forth.

"Come on, forgive me," she insisted.

I nodded, but said nothing. Those wings were gristly fellows.

"Out loud," she said.

She was the most resolute penitent I ever saw. "Swede, I forgive you. Is it all right now?"

She hugged her elbows. "Thanks, Reuben—can I have the feet?"

I whacked them off at a chop apiece and tossed them up to the truck. Swede caught them and scrambled over to the grainbed. My hands were freezing and I dreaded the next part—I ought to've taken Davy's offer to clean the goose. Aiming at a spot under the breastbone, I plunged in.

"Swede," I said—just talking so she'd stay with me—"I don't get what's wrong with Davy."

She didn't answer right away. She sat on the flatbed toying with the goose feet. She took so long to speak I got involved in a tangle of guts and forgot I'd said anything.

Finally she said, "He's mad about Dolly."

"Oh." Davy's girlfriend. "How come?"

She looked at me. "You heard," she said. "Last night, driving over."

We'd gotten a late start, as I mentioned. The football team had been busy getting whomped; it was almost eleven before we got on the road.

"I was sleeping."

"You were faking, I could tell. Just like me."

We heard the screen door open, up at the house. "Pancakes in five minutes!" Dad hollered. The screen slapped shut.

"Really, I was asleep—I swear it, Swede."

"Israel Finch and Tommy Basca had Dolly in the girls' locker room."

"What—how come?" Two boys had gone into the girls' locker room? You wouldn't have caught me in any girls' locker room. I might even have snickered, if it weren't for the look on Swede's face.

"They beat her up, Reuben. During the football game. Dad caught 'em."

It was only then that the names sunk in: *Israel Finch, Tommy Basca.* I shrunk up inside my coat. "How bad, Swede?"

"She's okay, I guess. I heard Dad say he got there *in time.*"

"What, did he chase 'em off? Did he fight 'em?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't talk about it to Davy."

"Dolly's all right, though?"

"I guess so." Swede, a goose foot in each hand, made them walk daintily along the edge of the flatbed.

"Then why's Davy mad? Wasn't he happy Dad caught those guys?" I didn't even want to say their names aloud.

"I don't know. Ask Davy if you want."

I wasn't sure I could do that. Though there were only five years between Davy and me, lately they'd seemed a weighty five. At times it felt like he was Dad's brother instead of mine.

Finishing the goose I held it under the pump until water surged clean from the cavity, then went up to the house with Swede. On the way she showed me how by pulling a tendon she could make a goose foot contract and relax. She made the foot into a tight goose fist and said, "Youuuu dirty raaaaat!" For a kid sister she did a very adequate Cagney.

We hunted again that afternoon, under skies so cold frost paisleyed the gunbarrels. Davy had missed the pancakes, but Dad had served them up merrily to Swede and me and not commented on Davy's absence; then he stoked the woodstove and the three of us went to our rooms to snooze. That's how goose-hunting is—you rise early and do the cold, thrilling work; then come in and eat; then fatigue sneaks up and knocks you flat. I pulled up the quilt and slept like a desperado. I woke to Davy sitting on the bed across from me, wiping down his shotgun with an oiled rag.

"Hey, Natty," he said, seeing me stir.

"Hey, Davy. We going back out?"

"A little bunch went down on the west quarter. Canadas." He hiked his eyebrows at me. "We're gonna crawl up."

"Okay!" I threw the covers back, stretched, and tried to shake out the murky dream I'd been having—there was a reptile of some sort in it. Davy laid the shotgun across his knees and leaned forward. A warm tobacco smell clung to him.

"Listen, Rube. You heard us talking about Dolly last night, didn't you?"

"I was asleep. Swede heard, though."

"Well, she didn't hear everything. Dad kept shut, to keep from scaring you guys, but you should know this. Finch and Basca made some pretty vicious threats. To Dad, I mean." Getting me by the eyes, Davy said, "They talked about hurting his family."

It took me a second to realize he meant us. Dread landed flopping in my stomach. We'd never had an enemy before, unless you counted Russia. I watched my brother closely.

"They're basically loudmouths," he said. "Cowards, windbags; they won't do anything. I don't want you to worry. Just keep an eye out, that's all." He was entirely relaxed, saying this, as though it was nothing we couldn't handle. It reassured me but was unsettling too. The way he mentioned Dolly, for example—breezing past her name as though she were somebody else, an aunt or something. He said, "Okay?"

"Okay."

"And let's not mention it to Swede, Natty. All right?"

"Nope. We don't need to scare her, I guess."

"Good." He reached down and picked up my boots and set them in my lap. "Now let's crawl up on those Canadas."

A crawlup, if you're not familiar, is a different kind of hunt from waiting among decoys. I stuck with Davy again, Swede with Dad, and we squirmed on our bellies up a shallow rise beyond which a few dozen honkers were feeding on stubbled wheat. This time there was no whispering among us; the light was almost gone and though we sup-