

Cars and Kites and Fire-balloons

My father was a fine mechanic. People who lived miles away used to bring their cars to him for repair rather than take them to their nearest garage. He loved engines. 'A petrol engine is sheer magic,' he said to me once. 'Just imagine being able to take a thousand different bits of metal... and if you fit them all together in a certain way... and then if you feed them a little oil and petrol... and if you press a little switch... suddenly those bits of metal will all come to life... and they will purr and hum and roar... they will make the wheels of a motor-car go whizzing round at fantastic speeds...'

It was inevitable that I, too, should fall in love with engines and cars. Don't forget that even before I could walk, the workshop had been my play-room, for where else could my father have put me so that he could keep an eye on me all day long? My toys were the greasy cogs and springs and pistons that lay around all over the place, and these, I can promise you, were far more fun to play with than most of the plastic stuff children are given these days.

So almost from birth, I began training to be a mechanic.

But now that I was five years old, there was the problem of school to think about. It was the law that parents must send their children to school at the age of five, and my father knew about this.

We were in the workshop, I remember, on my fifth birthday, when the talk about school started. I was helping my father to fit new brake linings to the rear wheel of a big Ford when suddenly he said to me, 'You know something interesting, Danny? You must be easily the best five-year-old mechanic in the world.'

This was the greatest compliment he had ever paid me. I was enormously pleased.

'You like this work, don't you?' he said. 'All this messing about with engines.'

'I absolutely love it,' I said.

He turned and faced me and laid a hand gently on my shoulder. 'I want to