

Danny the Champion of the World

The world I lived in consisted only of the filling-station, the workshop, the caravan, the school, and of course the woods and fields and streams in the countryside around. But I was never bored in my father's company. He was too sparky a man for that. Plots and plans and new ideas came flying off him like sparks from a grindstone.

'There's a good wind today' he said one Saturday morning. 'Just right for flying a kite. Let's make a kite, Danny'

So we made a kite. He showed me how to splice four thin sticks together in the shape of a star, with two more sticks across the middle to brace it. Then we cut up an old blue shirt of his and stretched the material across the frame-work of the kite. We added a long tail made of thread, with little leftover pieces of the shirt tied at intervals along it. We found a ball of string in the workshop and he showed me how to attach the string to the frame-work so that the kite would be properly balanced in flight.

Together we walked to the top of the hill behind the filling-station to release the kite. I found it hard to believe that this object, made only from a few sticks and a piece of old shirt, would actually fly. I held the string while my father held the kite, and the moment he let it go, it caught the wind and soared upward like a huge blue bird.

'Let out some more, Danny! he cried. 'Go on! As much as you like!'

Higher and higher soared the kite. Soon it was just a small blue dot dancing in the sky miles above my head, and it was thrilling to stand there holding on to something that was so far away and so very much alive. This faraway thing, was tugging and struggling on the end of the line like a big fish.

'Let's walk it back to the caravan,' my father said.

So we walked down the hill again with me holding the string and the kite pulling fiercely on the other end. When we came to the caravan we were careful not to get the string tangled in the apple tree and we brought it all the way round to the front steps.

'Tie it up to the steps,' my father said.

'Will it stay up?' I asked.

'It will if the wind doesn't drop,' he said.

The wind didn't drop. And I will tell you something amazing. That kite stayed up there all through the night, and at breakfast time next morning the small blue dot was still dancing and swooping in the sky. After breakfast I hauled it down and hung it carefully against a wall in the workshop for another day.

Not long after that, on a lovely still evening when there was no breath of wind anywhere, my father said to me,

'This is just the right weather for a fire-balloon. Let's make a fire-balloon.' He must have planned this one beforehand because he had already bought the four big sheets of tissue-paper and the pot of glue from Mr Witton's book-shop in the village. And now, using only the paper, the glue, a pair of scissors and a piece of thin wire, he made a huge magnificent fire-balloon in less than fifteen minutes. In the opening at the bottom, he tied a ball of cotton-wool, and we were ready to go.

It was getting dark when we carried it outside into the field behind the caravan. We had with us a bottle of methylated spirit and some matches. I held the balloon upright while my father crouched underneath it and carefully poured a little meths on to the ball of cotton-wool.

'Here goes,' he said, putting a match to the cotton-wool. 'Hold the sides out as much as you can, Danny!' A tall yellow flame leaped up from the ball of cotton-wool and went right inside the balloon.

'It'll catch on fire!' I cried.

'No it won't,' he said. 'Watch!'

Between us, we held the sides of the balloon out as much as possible to keep them away from the flame in the early stages. But soon the hot air filled the balloon and the danger was over.

'She's nearly ready!' my father said. 'Can you feel her floating?'

Yes!' I said. 'Yes! Shall we let go?'

'Not yet!... Wait a bit longer!... Wait until she's tugging to fly away!'

'She's tugging now!' I said.

'Right!' he cried. 'Let her go!'

Slowly, majestically, and in absolute silence, our wonderful balloon began to rise up into the night sky.

'It flies!' I shouted, clapping my hands and jumping about. 'It flies! It flies!'

My father was nearly as excited as I was.

'It's a beauty,' he said. 'This one's a real beauty. You never know how they're going to turn out until you fly them. Each one is different.'

Up and up it went, rising very fast now in the cool night air. It was like a magic fire-ball in the sky.

'Will other people see it?' I asked.

'I'm sure they will, Danny. It's high enough now for them to see it for miles around.'

'What will they think it is, Dad?'

'A flying saucer,' my father said. 'They'll probably call the police.'

A small breeze had taken hold of the balloon and was being carrying it away in the direction of the village.

'Let's follow it,' my father said. 'And with luck we'll find it when it comes down.'

We ran to the road. We ran along the road. We kept running.

'She's coming down!' my father shouted. 'The flames nearly gone out!'

We lost sight of it when the flame went out, but we guessed roughly which field it would be landing in, and we climbed over a gate and ran towards the place. For half an hour we searched the fields in the darkness, but we couldn't find the balloon.

The next morning I went back alone to search again. I searched four big fields before I found it. It was lying in the corner of a field that was full of black-and-white cows. The cows were all standing round it and staring at it with the huge wet eyes. But they hadn't harmed it one bit. So I carried it home and hung it up alongside the kite, against a wall in the workshop, for another day.

'You can fly the kite all by yourself any time you like,' my father said. 'But you must never fly the fire-balloon unless I'm with you. It's extremely dangerous.'

END

Questions

1. What is Danny's father like? Describe his character.
2. What two 'toys' does his father make?
3. How does Danny feel when these 'toys' fly?
4. Where does Danny's father find the materials to make these toys?
5. Where do Danny and his father go to test the flying toys?
6. Which toy can Danny play with on his own?
7. Why can't Danny play with the second toy on his own?
8. Why do they fly the second toy when it is dark?
9. Where does Danny store his flying toys?