"So that's the game, is it?" he said.

Claud was bending over the dog and acting like he hadn't heard.

"I don't want you here no more after this, you understand that?"

Claud went on fiddling with Jackie's collar.

I heard someone behind us saying, "That flatfaced bastard swung it pro perly on old Feasey this time." Someone else laughed. Mr Feasey walked awa y, Claud straightened up and went over with Jackie to the hare driver in t he blue jersey who had dismounted from his platform.

"Cigarette," Claud said, offering the pack.

The man took one, also the five pound note that was folded up small in Cl aud's fingers.

"Thanks," Claud said. "Thanks very much."

"Don't mention," the man said. Then Claud turned to me. "You get it al l on, Gordon?" He was jumping up and down and rubbing his hands and pattin g Jackie, and his lips trembled as he spoke.

"Yes. Half at twenty-fives, half at fifteens."

"Oh Christ, Gordon, that's marvellous. Wait here till I get the suitcase."

"You take Jackie," I said, "and go and sit in the car. I'll see you later."

There was nobody around the bookies now. I was the only one with anyt hing to collect, and I walked slowly with a sort of dancing stride and a wonderful bursting feeling in my chest, towards the first one in the line , the man with the magenta face and the white substance on his mouth. I s tood in front of him and I took all the time I wanted going through my pa ck of tickets to find the two that were his. The name was Syd Pratchett. It was written up large across his board in gold letters on a scarlet fie ld 'SYD PRATCHETT. THE BEST ODDS IN THE MIDLANDS. PROMPT SETTI

I handed him the first ticket and said, "Seventy-eight pounds to come." I t sounded so good I said it again, making a delicious little song of it. "Sev enty-eight pounds to come on this one." I didn't mean to gloat over Mr Pratch ett. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to like him quite a lot. I even fel t sorry for him having to fork out so much money. I hoped his wife and kids w ouldn't suffer.

"Number forty-two," Mr Pratchett said, turning to his clerk who held th e big book. "Forty-two wants seventy-eight pounds." There was a pause while the clerk ran his finger down the column of recorded bets. He did this twi ce, then he looked up at the boss and began to shake his head.

"No," he said. "Don't pay. That ticket backed Snailbox Lady."

Mr Pratchett, standing on his box, leaned over and peered down at the b ook. He seemed to be disturbed by what the clerk had said, and there was a look of genuine concern on the huge magenta face.

The clerk is a fool, I thought, and any moment now Mr Pratchett's going to tell him so.

But when Mr Pratchett turned back to me, the eyes had become narrow and hostile. "Now, look Charley," he said softly. "Don't let's have any of tha t. You know very well you bet Snailbox. What's the idea?"

"I bet Black Panther," I said. "Two separate bets of three pounds each at twenty-five to one. Here's the second ticket."

This time he didn't even bother to check it with the book. "You bet Sna ilbox, Charley," he said. "I remember you coming round." With that, he turn ed away from me and started wiping the names of the last race runners off h is board with a wet rag. Behind him, the clerk had closed the book and was lighting himself a cigarette. I stood watching them, and I could feel the s weat beginning to break through the skin all over my body.

"Let me see the book."

Mr Pratchett blew his nose in the wet rag and dropped it to the ground. "Look," he said, "why don't you go away and stop annoying me?"

The point was this: a bookmaker's ticket, unlike a totalisator ticket, ne ver has anything written on it regarding the nature of your bet. This is norm al practice, the same at every racetrack in the country, whether it's the Sil ver Ring at Newmarket, the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, or a tiny country flappi ng-track near Oxford. All you receive is a card bearing the bookie's name and a serial number. The wager is (or should be) recorded by the bookie's clerk in his book alongside the number of the ticket, but apart from that there is no evidence at all of how you betted.

"Go on," Mr Pratchett was saying. "Hop it."

I stepped back a pace and glanced down the long line of bookmakers. No ne of them was looking my way. Each was standing motionless on his little wooden box beside his wooden placard, staring straight ahead into the crow d. I went up to the next one and presented a ticket.

"I had three pounds on Black Panther at twenty-five to one," I said firm ly. "Seventy-eight pounds to come."

This man, who had a soft inflamed face, went through exactly the same r outine as Mr Pratchett, questioning his clerk, peering at the book, and giv ing me the same answers.

"Whatever's the matter with you?" he said quietly, speaking to me as thoug h I were eight years old. "Trying such a silly thing as that."

This time I stepped well back. "You dirty thieving bastards!" I cried. "Th e whole lot of you!"

Automatically, as though they were puppets, all the heads down the line flicked round and looked at me. The expressions didn't alter. It was just th e heads that moved, all seventeen of them, and seventeen pairs of cold glass y eyes looked down at me. There was not the faintest flicker of interest in any of them.

'Somebody spoke,' they seemed to be saying. 'We didn't hear it. It's a nice

day today.'

The crowd, sensing excitement, was beginning to move in around me. I ran back to Mr Pratchett, right up close to him and poked him in the stomach with my finger. "You're a thief! A lousy little thief!" I shouted.

The extraordinary thing was, Mr Pratchett didn't seem to resent this at all.

"Well, I never," he said. "Look who's talking."

Then suddenly the big face broke into a wide, frog-like grin, and he looked over at the crowd and shouted. "Look who's talking!"

All at once everybody started to laugh. Down the line the bookies were coming to life and turning to each other and laughing and pointing at me and shouting, "Look who's talking! Look who's talking!" The crowd began to take up the cry as well, and I stood there on the grass alongside Mr Pratchett with his wad of tickets as thick as a pack of cards in my hand, listening to them and feeling slightly hysterical. Over the heads of the people I could see Mr Feasey beside his blackboard, already chalking up the runners for the next race; and then beyond him, far away up the top of the field, I caught sight of Claud standing by the van, waiting for me with the suitcase in his hand.

It was time to go home.

========== EIGHT FURTHER TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED ========== The Umbrella Man 'M going to tell you about a funny thing that happened to my mother and me yesterday evening. I am twelve years old and I'm a girl. My mother is thirty-four but I am nearly as tall as her already.

Yesterday afternoon, my mother took me up to London to see the dentist. He found one hole. It was in a back tooth and he filled it without hurting me too much. After that, we went to a cafŽ. I had a banana split and my mother had a cup of coffee. By the time we got up to leave it was about six o'clock.

When we came out of the cafŽ it had started to rain. "We must get a taxi," my mother said. We were wearing ordinary hats and coats, and it was raining quite hard.

"Why don't we go back into the cafŽ and wait for it to stop?" I said. I wanted another of those banana splits. They were gorgeous.

"It isn't going to stop," my mother said. "We must get home."

We stood on the pavement in the rain, looking for a taxi. Lots of them came by but they all had passengers inside them. "I wish we had a car with a chauffeur," my mother said.

Just then a man came up to us. He was a small man and he was pretty old, probably seventy or more. He raised his hat politely and said to my mot

her, "Excuse me, I do hope you will excuse me... " He had a fine white mou stache and bushy white eyebrows and a wrinkly pink face. He was sheltering under an umbrella which he held high over his head.

"Yes?" my mother said, very cool and distant.

"I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you," he said. "It is only a very small favour."

I saw my mother looking at him suspiciously. She is a suspicious perso n, my mother. She is especially suspicious of two things--strange men and boiled eggs. When she cuts the top off a boiled egg, she pokes around insi de it with her spoon as though expecting to find a mouse or something. Wit h strange men, she has a golden rule which says, 'The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become.' This little old man was parti cularly nice. He was polite. He was welispoken. He was well-dressed. He wa s a real gentleman. The reason I knew he was a gentleman was because of hi s shoes. 'You can always spot a gentleman by the shoes he wears,' was anot her of my mother's favourite sayings. This man had beautiful brown shoes.

"The truth of the matter is," the little man was saying, "I've got myself into a bit of a scrape. I need some help. Not much I assure you. It's almost n othing, in fact, but I do need it. You see, madam, old people like me often be come terribly forgetful...

My mother's chin was up and she was staring down at him along the full length of her nose. It was a fearsome thing, this frosty-nosed stare of my mother's. Most people go to pieces completely when she gives it to them. I once saw my own headmistress begin to stammer and simper like an idiot when my mother gave her a really foul frosty-noser. But the little man on the p avement with the umbrella over his head didn't bat an eyelid. He gave a gen tle smile and said, "I beg you to believe, madam, that I am not in the habi t of stopping ladies in the street and telling them my troubles."

"I should hope not," my mother said.

I felt quite embarrassed by my mother's sharpness. I wanted to say to her , 'Oh, mummy, for heaven's sake, he's a very very old man, and he's sweet and polite, and he's in some sort of trouble, so don't be so beastly to him.' Bu t I didn't say anything.

The little man shifted his umbrella from one hand to the other. "I've never forgotten it before," he said.

"You've never forgotten what?" my mother asked sternly.

"My wallet," he said. "I must have left it in my other jacket. Isn't that the silliest thing to do?"

"Are you asking me to give you money?" my mother said.

"Oh, good gracious me, no!" he cried. "Heaven forbid I should ever do tha t!"

"Then what are you asking?" my mother said. "Do hurry up. We're getting

soaked to the skin here."

"I know you are," he said. "And that is why I'm offering you this umbrella of mine to protect you, and to keep forever, if... if only... "If only what?" my mother said.

"If only you would give me in return a pound for my taxi-fare just to get me home."

My mother was still suspicious. "If you had no money in the first place," she said, "then how did you get here?"

"I walked," he answered. "Every day I go for a lovely long walk and then I summon a taxi to take me home. I do it every day of the year."

"Why don't you walk home now?" my mother asked.

"Oh, I wish I could," he said. "I do wish I could. But I don't think I could manage it on these silly old legs of mine. I've gone too far already."

My mother stood there chewing her lower lip. She was beginning to melt a bit, I could see that. And the idea of getting an umbrella to shelter under must have tempted her a good deal.

"It's a lovely umbrella," the little man said.

"So I've noticed," my mother said.

"It's silk," he said.

"I can see that."

"Then why don't you take it, madam," he said. "It cost me over twenty po unds, I promise you. But that's of no importance so long as I can get home a nd rest these old legs of mine."

I saw my mother's hand feeling for the clasp of her purse. She saw me wa tching her. I was giving her one of my own frosty-nosed looks this time and she knew exactly what I was telling her. Now listen, mummy, I was telling he r, you simply mustn't take advantage of a tired old man in this way. It's a rotten thing to do. My mother paused and looked back at me. Then she said to the little man, "I don't think it's quite right that I should take an umbre lla from you worth twenty pounds. I think I'd better just give you the taxi-fare and be done with it."

"No, no no!" he cried. "It's out of the question! I wouldn't dream of it! Not in a million years! I would never accept money from you like that! Take the umbrella, dear lady, and keep the rain off your shoulders!"

My mother gave me a triumphant sideways look. There you are, she was t elling me. You're wrong. He wants me to have it.

She fished into her purse and took out a pound note. She held it out to the little man. He took it and handed her the umbrella. He pocketed the po und, raised his hat, gave a quick bow from the waist, and said, "Thank you, madam, thank you." Then he was gone.

"Come under here and keep dry, darling," my mother said. "Aren't we lucky . I've never had a silk umbrella before. I couldn't afford it."

"Why were you so horrid to him in the beginning?" I asked.

"I wanted to satisfy myself he wasn't a trickster," she said. "And I did. He was a gentleman. I'm very pleased I was able to help him."

"Yes, mummy," I said.

"A real gentleman," she went on. "Wealthy, too, otherwise he wouldn't hav e had a silk umbrella. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't a titled person. Sir Harry Goldsworthy or something like that."

"Yes, mummy."

"This will be a good lesson to you," she went on. "Never rush things. Always take your time when you are summing someone up. Then you'll never make mistakes."

"There he goes," I said. "Look."

"Where?"

"Over there. He's crossing the street. Goodness, mummy, what a hurry he' s in."

We watched the little man as he dodged nimbly in and out of the traffic. W hen he reached the other side of the street, he turned left, walking very fast .

"He doesn't look very tired to me, does he to you, mummy?"

My mother didn't answer.

"He doesn't look as though he's trying to get a taxi, either," I said.

My mother was standing very still and stiff, staring across the street at the little man. We could see him clearly. He was in a terrific hurry. He was bustling along the pavement, sidestepping the other pedestrians and swinging his arms like a soldier on the march.

"He's up to something," my mother said, stony-faced.

"But what?"

"I don't know," my mother snapped. "But I'm going to find out. Come wi th me." She took my arm and we crossed the street together. Then we turned left.

"Can you see him?" my mother asked.

"Yes. There he is. He's turning right down the next street." We came to the corner and turned right. The little man was about twenty yards ahead of us. He was scuttling along like a rabbit and we had to walk very fast to kee p up with him. The rain was pelting down harder than ever now and I could se e it dripping from the brim of his hat on to his shoulders. But we were snug and dry under our lovely big silk umbrella.

"What is he up to?" my mother said.

"What if he turns round and sees us?" I asked.

"I don't care if he does," my mother said. "He lied to us. He said he was t oo tired to walk any further and he's practically running us off our feet! He's a barefaced liar! He's a crook!"

"You mean he's not a titled gentleman?" I asked.

"Be quiet," she said.

At the next crossing, the little man turned right again.

Then he turned left.

Then right.

"I'm not giving up now," my mother said.

"He's disappeared!" I cried. "Where's he gone?"

"He went in that door!" my mother said. "I saw him! Into that house! Grea t heavens, it's a pub!"

It was a pub. In big letters right across the front it said THE RED LION.

"You're not going in are you, mummy?"

"No," she said. "We'll watch from outside."

There was a big plate-glass window along the front of the pub, and althou gh it was a bit steamy on the inside, we could see through it very well if we went close.

We stood huddled together outside the pub window. I was clutching my m other's arm. The big raindrops were making a loud noise on our umbrella. " There he is," I said. "Over there."

The room we were looking into was full of people and cigarette smoke, a nd our little man was in the middle of it all. He was now without his hat a nd coat, and he was edging his way through the crowd towards the bar. When he reached it, he placed both hands on the bar itself and spoke to the barm an. I saw his lips moving as he gave his order. The barman turned away from him for a few seconds and came back with a smallish tumbler filled to the brim with light brown liquid. The little man placed a pound note on the cou nter.

"That's my pound!" my mother hissed. "By golly, he's got a nerve!"

"What's in the glass?" I asked.

"Whisky," my mother said. "Neat whisky."

The barman didn't give him any change from the pound.

"That must be a treble whisky," my mummy said.

"What's a treble?" I asked.

"Three times the normal measure," she answered.

The little man picked up the glass and put it to his lips. He tilted it gen tly. Then he tilted it higher... and higher... and higher... and very soon all the whisky had disappeared down his throat in one long pour. "That's a jolly ex pensive drink," I said.

"It's ridiculous!" my mummy said. "Fancy paying a pound for something to swallow in one go!"

"It cost him more than a pound," I said. "It cost him a twenty-pound silk umbrella."

"So it did," my mother said. "He must be mad."

The little man was standing by the bar with the empty glass in his hand . He was smiling now, and a sort of golden glow of pleasure was spreading o ver his round pink face. I saw his tongue come out to lick the white mousta che, as though searching for one last drop of that precious whisky.

Slowly, he turned away from the bar and edged his way back through the crowd to where his hat and coat were hanging. He put on his hat. He put on his coat. Then, in a manner so superbly cool and casual that you hardly not iced anything at all, he lifted from the coat-rack one of the many wet umbr ellas hanging there, and off he went.

"Did you see that!" my mother shrieked. "Did you see what he did!"

"Ssshh!" I whispered. "He's coming out!"

We lowered our umbrella to hide our faces, and peered out from under it.

Out he came. But he never looked in our direction. He opened his new u mbrella over his head and scurried off down the road the way he had come.

"So that's his little game!" my mother said.

"Neat," I said. "Super." We followed him back to the main street where w e had first met him, and we watched him as he proceeded, with no trouble at all, to exchange his new umbrella for another pound note. This time it was w ith a tall thin fellow who didn't even have a coat or hat. And as soon as th e transaction was completed, our little man trotted off down the street and was lost in the crowd. But this time he went in the opposite direction.

"You see how clever he is!" my mother said. "He never goes to the same pub twice!"

"He could go on doing this all night," I said.

"Yes," my mother said. "Of course. But I'll bet he prays like mad for rain y days."

Mr Botibol

MR BOTIBOL pushed his way through the revolving doors and emerged into the large foyer of the hotel. He took off his hat, and holding it in front of him with both hands, he advanced nervously a few paces, paused and stood looking around him, searching the faces of the lunchtime crowd. Several pe ople turned and stared at him in mild astonishment, and he heard--or he th ought he heard--at least one woman's voice saying, "My dear, do look what' s just come in!"

At last he spotted Mr Clements sitting at a small table in the far corn er, and he hurried over to him. Clements had seen him coming, and now, as h e watched Mr Botibol threading his way cautiously between the tables and th e people, walking on his toes in such a meek and self-effacing manner and c

lutching his hat before him with both hands, he thought how wretched it mus t be for any man to look as conspicuous and as odd as this Botibol. He rese mbled, to an extraordinary degree, an asparagus. His long narrow stalk did not appear to have any shoulders at all; it merely tapered upwards, growing gradually narrower and narrower until it came to a kind of point at the to p of the small bald head. He was tightly encased in a shiny blue double-bre asted suit, and this, for some curious reason, accentuated the illusion of a vegetable to a preposterous degree.

Clements stood up, they shook hands, and then at once, even before they had sat down again, Mr Botibol said, "I have decided, yes I have decided t o accept the offer which you made to me before you left my office last nigh t."

For some days Clements had been negotiating, on behalf of clients, for the purchase of the firm known as Botibol & Co., of which Mr Botibol was so le owner, and the night before, Clements had made his first offer. This was merely an exploratory, much-too-low bid, a kind of signal to the seller th at the buyers were seriously interested. And by God, thought Clements, the poor fool has gone and accepted it. He nodded gravely many times in an effo rt to hide his astonishment, and he said, "Good, good. I'm so glad to hear that, Mr Botibol." Then he signalled a waiter and said, "Two large martinis."

"No, please!" Mr Botibol lifted both hands in horrified protest.

"Come on," Clements said. "This is an occasion."

"I drink very little, and never, no never during the middle of the day."

But Clements was in a gay mood now and he took no notice. He ordered th e martinis and when they came along Mr Botibol was forced, by the banter an d good-humour of the other, to drink to the deal which had just been conclu ded. Clements then spoke briefly about the drawing up and signing of docume nts, and when all that had been arranged, he called for two more cocktails. Again Mr Botibol protested, but not quite so vigorously this time, and Cle ments ordered the drinks and then he turned and smiled at the other man in a friendly way. "Well, Mr Botibol," he said, "now that it's all over, I sug gest we have a pleasant non-business lunch together. What d'you say to that ? And it's on me."

"As you wish, as you wish," Mr Botibol answered without any enthusias m. He had a small melancholy voice and a way of pronouncing each word sep arately and slowly, as though he was explaining something to a child.

When they went into the dining-room Clements ordered a bottle of Lafite 1912 and a couple of plump roast partridges to go with it. He had already calculated in his head the amount of his commission and he was feeling fine . He began to make bright conversation, switching smoothly from one subject to another in the hope of touching on something that might interest his gu est. But it was no good. Mr Botibol appeared to be only half listening. Eve

ry now and then he inclined his small bald head a little to one side or the other and said, "Indeed." When the wine came along Clements tried to have a talk about that.

"I am sure it is excellent," Mr Botibol said, "but please give me only a dro p."

Clements told a funny story. When it was over, Mr Botibol regarded him solemnly for a few moments, then he said, "How amusing." After that Clement s kept his mouth shut and they ate in silence. Mr Botibol was drinking his wine and he didn't seem to object when his host reached over and refilled h is glass. By the time they had finished eating, Clements estimated privatel y that his guest had consumed at least three-quarters of the bottle.

"A cigar, Mr Botibol?"

"Oh no, thank you."

"A little brandy?"

"No really. I am not accustomed..

Clements noticed that the man's cheeks were slightly flushed and that hi s eyes had become bright and watery. Might as well get the old boy properly drunk while I'm about it, he thought, and to the waiter he said, "Two brandi es."

When the brandies arrived, Mr Botibol looked at his large glass suspicio usly for a while, then he picked it up, took one quick birdlike sip and put it down again. "Mr Clements," he said suddenly, "how I envy you."

"Me? But why?"

"I will tell you, Mr Clements, I will tell you, if I may make so bold." There was a nervous, mouselike quality in his voice which made it seem he wa s apologizing for everything he said.

"Please tell me," Clements said.

"It is because to me you appear to have made such a success of your life."

He's going to get melancholy drunk, Clements thought. He's one of the one s that gets melancholy and I can't stand it. "Success," he said, "I don't see anything especially successful about me."

"Oh yes, indeed. Your whole life, if I may say so, Mr Clements, appears t o be such a pleasant and successful thing."

"I'm a very ordinary person," Clements said. He was trying to figure just how drunk the other really was.

"I believe," said Mr Botibol, speaking slowly, separating each word carefu lly from the other, "I believe that the wine has gone a little to my head, but ... " He paused, searching for words. "... But I do want to ask you just one q uestion." He had poured some salt on to the tablecloth and he was shaping it i nto a little mountain with the tip of one finger.

"Mr Clements," he said without looking up, "do you think that it is possi