e. Watching him, I saw him suddenly stop, hesitate for perhaps a second, the n again begin to cut, but very cautiously this time, and now I could hear a different sound, a muffled rasping noise as the blade of the knife grated ag ainst something hard.

Bert pulled out the knife and examined the blade, testing it with his th umb. He put it back, letting it down gingerly into the cut, feeling gently d ownward until it came again upon the hard object; and once more, when he mad e another cautious little sawing movement, there came that grating sound.

Rummins turned his head and looked over his shoulder at the boy. He was in the act of lifting an armful of loosened thatch, bending forward with bot h hands grasping the straw, but he stopped dead in the middle of what he was doing and looked at Bert. Bert remained still, hands holding the handle of the knife, a look of bewilderment on his face. Behind, the sky was a pale cl ear blue and the two figures up there on the hayrick stood out sharp and bla ck like an etching against the paleness.

Then Rummins' voice, louder than usual, edged with an unmistakable app rehension that the loudness did nothing to conceal: "Some of them haymaker s is too bloody careless what they put on a rick these days."

He paused, and again the silence, the men motionless, and across the ro ad Claud leaning motionless against the red pump. It was so quiet suddenly we could hear a woman's voice far down the valley on the next farm calling the men to food.

Then Rummins again, shouting where there was no need to shout: "Go on, t hen! Go on an' cut through it, Bert! A little stick of wood won't hurt the s oddin' knife!"

For some reason, as though perhaps scenting trouble, Claud came stroll ing across the road and joined me leaning on the gate. He didn't say anyth ing, but both of us seemed to know that there was something disturbing abo ut these two men, about the stillness that surrounded them and especially about Rummins himself. Rummins was frightened. Bert was frightened too. An d now as I watched them, I became conscious of a small vague image moving just below the surface of my memory. I tried desperately to reach back and grasp it. Once I almost touched it, but it slipped away and when I went a fter it I found myself travelling back and back through many weeks, back i nto the yellow days of summer--the warm wind blowing down the valley from the south, the big beech trees heavy with their foliage, the fields turnin g 'to gold, the harvesting, the haymaking, the rick--the building of the rick.

Instantly I felt a fine electricity of fear running over the skin of my stoma ch.

Yes--the building of the rick. When was it we had built it? June? That w as it, of course a hot muggy day in June with the clouds low overhead and th e air thick with the smell of thunder.

And Rummins had said, "Let's for God's sake get it in quick before the ra in comes."

And Ole Jimmy had said, "There ain't going to be no rain. And there ain't no hurry either. You know very well when thunder's in the south it don't cro ss over into the valley."

Rummins, standing up in the cart handing out the pitch-forks, had not an swered him. He was in a furious brooding temper because of his anxiety about getting in the hay before it rained.

"There ain't gin' to be no rain before evening," Ole Jimmy had repeate d, looking at Rummins; and Rummins had stared back at him, the eyes glimme ring with a slow anger.

All through the morning we had worked without a pause, loading the hay into the cart, trundling it across the field, pitching it out on to the slo wly growing rick that stood over by the gate opposite the filling-station. We could hear the thunder in the south as it came towards us and moved away again. Then it seemed to return and remain stationary somewhere beyond the hills, rumbling intermittently. When we looked up we could see the clouds overhead moving and changing shape in the turbulence of the upper air, but on the ground it was hot and muggy and there was no breath of wind. We work ed slowly, listlessly in the heat, shirts wet with sweat, faces shining.

Claud and I had worked beside Rummins on the rick itself, helping to shape it, and I could remember how very hot it had been and the flies aro und my face and the sweat pouring out everywhere; and especially I could remember the grim scowling presence of Rummins beside me, working with a desperate urgency and watching the sky and shouting at the men to hurry.

At noon, in spite of Rummins, we had knocked off for lunch.

Claud and I had sat down under the hedge with Ole Jimmy and another ma n called Wilson who was a soldier home on leave, and it was too hot to do much talking. Wilson had some bread and cheese and a canteen of cold tea. Ole Jimmy had a satchel that was an old gas-mask container, and in this, c losely packed, standing upright with their necks protruding, were six pint bottles of beer.

"Come on," he said, offering a bottle to each of us.

"I'd like to buy one from you," Claud said, knowing very well the old man had little money.

"Take it."

"I must pay you."

"Don't be so daft. Drink it."

He was a very good old man, good and clean, with a clean pink face that he shaved each day. He had used to be a carpenter, but they retired him at t he age of seventy and that was some years before. Then the Village Council, seeing him still active, had given him the job of looking after the newly bu

ilt children's playground, of maintaining the swings and see-saws in good re pair and also of acting as a kind of gentle watchdog, seeing that none of th e kids hurt themselves or did anything foolish.

That was a fine job for an old man to have and everybody seemed please d with the way things were going--until a certain Saturday night. That nig ht Ole Jimmy had got drunk and gone reeling and singing down the middle of the High Street with such a howling noise that people got out of their be ds to see what was going on below. The next morning they had sacked him sa ying he was a waster and a drunkard not fit to associate with young childr en on the playground.

But then an astonishing thing happened. The first day that he stayed aw ay--a Monday it was--not one single child came near the playground.

Nor the next day, nor the one after that.

All week the swings and the see-saws and the high slide with steps going up to it stood deserted. Not a child went near them. Instead they followed Ole Jimmy out into a field behind the Rectory and played their games there w ith him watching; and the result of all this was that after a while the Coun cil had had no alternative but to give the old man back his job.

He still had it now and he still got drunk and no one said anything about it any more. He left it only for a few days each year, at haymaking time. Al l his life Ole Jimmy had loved to go haymaking and he wasn't going to give it up yet.

"You want one?" he asked now, holding a bottle out to Wilson, the soldier .

"No thanks. I got tea."

"They say tea's good on a hot day."

"It is. Beer makes me sleepy."

"If you like," I said to Ole Jimmy, "we could walk across to the filling-station and I'll do you a couple of nice sandwiches? Would you like that?"

"Beer's plenty. There's more food in one bottle of beer, me lad, than twe nty sandwiches."

He smiled at me, showing two rows of palepink, toothless gums, but it was a pleasant smile and there was nothing repulsive about the way the gum s showed.

We sat for a while in silence. The soldier finished his bread and cheese and lay back on the ground, tilting his hat forward over his face. Ole Jimmy had drunk three bottles of beer, and now he offered the last to Claud and me.

"No thanks."

"No thanks. One's plenty for me."

The old man shrugged, unscrewed the stopper, tilted his head back and dr ank, pouring the beer into his mouth with the lips held open so the liquid r

an smoothly without gurgling down his throat. He wore a hat that was of no c olour at all and of no shape, and it did not fall off when he tilted back hi s head.

"Ain't Rummins goin' to give that old horse a drink?" he asked, lowering t he bottle, looking across the field at the great carthorse that stood steaming between the shafts of the cart.

"Not Rummins."

"Horses is thirsty, just the same as us." Ole Jimmy paused, still looking at the horse. "You got a bucket of water in that place of yours there?"

"Of course."

"No reason why we shouldn't give the old horse a drink then, is there?"

"That's a very good idea. We'll give him a drink."

Claud and I both stood up and began walking towards the gate, and I re member turning and calling to the old man: "You quite sure you wouldn't li ke me to bring you a nice sandwich? Won't take a second to make."

He shook his head and waved the bottle at us and said something about tak ing himself a little nap. We went on through the gate over the road to the fi lling station.

I suppose we stayed away for about an hour attending to customers and ge tting ourselves something to eat, and when at length we returned, Claud carr ying the bucket of water, I noticed that the rick was at least six foot high.

"Some water for the old horse," Claud said, looking hard at Rummins who was up in the cart pitching hay on to the rick.

The horse put its head in the bucket, sucking and blowing gratefully at th e water.

"Where's Ole Jimmy?" I asked. We wanted the old man to see the water be cause it had been his idea.

When I asked the question there was a moment, a brief moment, when Ru mminS hesitated, pitchfork in mid-air, looking around him.

"I brought him a sandwich," I added. "Bloody old fool drunk too much b eer and gone off home to sleep," Rummins said.

I strolled along the hedge back to the place where we had been sitting w ith Ole Jimmy. The five empty bottles were lying there in the grass. So was the satchel. I picked up the satchel and carried it back to Rummins.

"I don't think Ole Jimmy's gone home, Mr Rummins," I said, holding up the satchel by the long shoulder-band. Rummins glanced at it but made no r eply. He was in a frenzy of haste now because the thunder was closer, the clouds blacker, the heat more oppressive than ever.

Carrying the satchel, I started back to the filling station where I remai ned for the rest of the afternoon, serving customers. Towards evening, when t he rain came, I glanced across the road and noticed that they had got the hay in and were laying a tarpaulin over the rick.

In a few days the thatcher arrived and took the tarpaulin off and made a roof of straw instead. He was a good thatcher and he made a fine roof with lo ng straw, thick and well-packed. The slope was nicely angled, the edges clean ly clipped, and it was a pleasure to look at it from the road or from the doo r of the filling station.

All this came flooding back to me now as clearly as if it were yesterday --the building of the rick on that hot thundery day in June, the yellow fiel d, the sweet woody smell of the hay; and Wilson the soldier, with tennis sho es on his feet, Bert with the boiled eye, Ole Jimmy with the clean old face, the pink naked gums; and Rummins, the broad dwarf, standing up in the cart scowling at the sky because he was anxious about the rain.

At this very moment, there he was again, this Rummins, crouching on top of the rick with a sheaf of thatch in his arms looking round at the son, the tal l Bert, motionless also, both of them black like silhouettes against the sky, and once again I felt the fine electricity of fear as it came and went in litt le waves over the skin of my stomach.

"Go on and cut through it, Bert," Rummins said, speaking loudly.

Bert put pressure on the big knife and there was a high grating noise as the edge of the blade sawed across something hard. It was clear from Bert's f ace that he did not like what he was doing.

It took several minutes before the knife was through--then again at last t he softer sound of the blade slicing the tight-packed hay and Bert's face turn ed sideways to the father, grinning with relief, nodding inanely.

"Go on and cut it out," Rummins said, and still he did not move.

Bert made a second vertical cut the same depth as the first; then he got d own and pulled the bale of hay so it came away cleanly from the rest of the ri ck like a chunk of cake, dropping into the cart at his feet.

Instantly the boy seemed to freeze, staring stupidly at the newly expos ed face of the rick, unable to believe or perhaps refusing to believe what this thing was that he had cut in two. Rummins, who knew very well what it was, had turned away and was climbing quickly down the other side of the ri ck. He moved so fast he was through the gate and half-way across the road b efore Bert started to scream.

MR HODDY

They got out of the car and went in the front door of Mr Hoddy's house.

"I've an idea Dad's going to question you rather sharp tonight," Glance w hispered.

"About what, Glance?"

"The usual stuff. Jobs and things like that. And whether you can support m e in a fitting way."

"Jackie's going to do that," Claud said. "When Jackie wins there won't be any need for any jobs... "Don't you ever mention Jackie to my dad, Claud Cub bage, or that'll be the end of it. If there's one thing in the world he can't abide it's greyhounds. Don't you ever forget that."

"Oh Christ," Claud said.

"Tell him something else anything--anything to make him happy, see?" An d with that she led Claud into the parlour.

Mr Hoddy was a widower, a man with a prim sour mouth and an expression of eternal disapproval all over his face. He had the small, close-together teeth of his daughter Glance, the same suspicious, inward look about the ey es, but none of her freshness and vitality, none of her warmth. He was a sm all sour apple of a man, grey-skinned and shrivelled, with a dozen or so su rviving strands of black hair pasted across the dome of his bald head. But a very superior man was Mr Hoddy, a grocer's assistant, one who wore a spot less white gown at his work, who handled large quantities of such precious commodities as butter and sugar, who was deferred to, even smiled at by eve ry housewife in the village.

Claud Cubbage was never quite at his ease in this house and that was prec isely as Mr Hoddy intended it. They were sitting round the fire in the parlou r with cups of tea in their hands, Mr Hoddy in the best chair to the right of the fireplace, Claud and Glance on the sofa, decorously separated by a wide space. The younger daughter, Ada, was on a hard upright chair to the left, an d they made a little circle round the fire, a stiff, tense little circle, pri mly tea-sipping.

"Yes, Mr Hoddy," Claud was saying, "you can be quite sure both Gordon a nd me's got quite a number of nice little ideas up our sleeves this very mo ment. It's only a question of taking our time and making sure which is goin g to be the most profitable."

"What sort of ideas?" Mr Hoddy asked, fixing Claud with his small, disa pproving eyes.

"Ah, there you are now. That's it, you see." Claud shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. His blue lounge suit was tight around his chest, and it was espe cially tight between his legs, up in the crutch. The tightness in his crutch was actually painful to him and he wanted terribly to hitch it downward.

"This man you call Gordon, I thought he had a profitable business out t here as it is," Mr Hoddy said. "Why does he want to change?"

"Absolutely right, Mr Hoddy. It's a firstrate business. But it's a good th ing to keep expanding, see. New ideas is what we're after. Something I can com e in on as well and take a share of the profits."

"Such as what?"

Mr Hoddy was eating a slice of currant cake, nibbling it round the edges, and his small mouth was like the mouth of a caterpillar biting a tiny curved s lice out of the edge of a leaf.

"Such as what?" he asked again.

"There's long conferences, Mr Hoddy, takes place every day between Gor don and me about these different matters of business."

"Such as what?" he repeated, relentless.

Glance glanced sideways at Claud, encouraging. Claud turned his large slow eyes upon Mr Hoddy, and he was silent. He wished Mr Hoddy wouldn't pu sh him around like this, always shooting questions at him and glaring at h im and acting just exactly like he was the bloody adjutant or something.

"Such as what?" Mr Hoddy said, and this time Claud knew that he was not going to let go. Also, his instinct warned him that the old man was trying t o create a crisis.

"Well now," he said, breathing deep. "I don't really want to go into detai ls until we got it properly worked out. All we're doing so far is turning our ideas over in our minds, see."

"All I'm asking," Mr Hoddy said irritably, "is what sort of business are y ou contemplating? I presume that it's respectable?"

"Now please, Mr Hoddy. You don't for one moment think we'd even so muc h as consider anything that wasn't absolutely and entirely respectable, do you?"

Mr Hoddy grunted, stirring his tea slowly, watching Claud. Glance sat mut e and fearful on the sofa, gazing into the fire.

"I've never been in favour of starting a business," Mr Hoddy pronounced , defending his own failure in that line. "A good respectable job is all a man should wish for. A respectable job in respectable surroundings. Too muc h hokey-pokey in business for my liking."

"The thing is this," Claud said, desperate now. "All I want is to provi de my wife with everything she can possibly desire. A house to live in and furniture and a flower garden and a washing-machine and all the best things in the world. That's what I want to do, and you can't do that on an ordina ry wage, now can you? It's impossible to get enough money to do that unless you go into business, Mr Hoddy. You'll surely agree with me there?"

Mr Hoddy, who had worked for an ordinary wage all his life, didn't much like this point of view.

"And don't you think I provide everything my family wants, might I ask?"

"Oh, yes, and more!" Claud cried fervently. "But you've got a very super ior job, Mr Hoddy, and that makes all the difference."

"But what sort of business are you thinking of?" the man persisted.

Claud sipped his tea to give himself a little more time and he couldn't h

elp wondering how the miserable old bastard's face would look if he simply up and told him the truth right there and then, if he'd said what we've got Mr Hoddy, if you really wants to know, is a couple of greyhounds and one's a per fect ringer for the other and we're going to bring off the biggest goddam gam ble in the history of flapping, see. He'd like to watch the old bastard's fac e if he said that, he really would.

They were all waiting for him to proceed now, sitting there with cups o f tea in their hands staring at him and waiting for him to say something go od. "Well," he said, speaking very slowly because he was thinking deep. "I' ve been pondering something a long time now, something as'll make more mone y even than Gordon's secondhand cars or anything else come to that, and pra ctically no expense involved." That's better, he told himself. Keep going a long like that.

"And what might that be?"

"Something so queer, Mr Hoddy, there isn't one in a million would even be lieve it."

"Well, what is it?" Mr Hoddy placed his cup carefully on the little tab le beside him and leaned forward to listen. And Claud, watching him, knew m ore than ever that this man and all those like him were his enemies. It was the Mr Hoddys were the trouble. They were all the same. He knew them all, with their clean ugly hands, their grey skin, their acrid mouths, their ten dency to develop little round bulging bellies just below the waistcoat; and always the unctuous curl of the nose, the weak chin, the suspicious eyes t hat were dark and moved too quick. The Mr Hoddys. Oh, Christ.

"Well, what is it?"

"It's an absolute gold-mine, Mr Hoddy, honestly it is."

"I'll believe that when I hear it."

"It's a thing so simple and amazing most people wouldn't even bother to do it." He had it now--something he had actually been thinking seriously a bout for a long time, something he'd always wanted to do. He leaned across and put his teacup carefully on the table beside Mr Hoddy's, then, not know ing what to do with his hands, placed them on his knees, palms downward.

"Well, come on man, what is it?"

"It's maggots," Claud answered softly.

Mr Hoddy jerked back as though someone had squirted water in his face. "Maggots!" he said, aghast. "Maggots? What on earth do you mean, maggots? " Claud had forgotten that this word was almost unmentionable in any selfr especting grocer's shop. Ada began to giggle, but Clarice glanced at her s o malignantly the giggle died on her mouth.

"That's where the money is, starting a maggot factory."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Honestly, Mr Hoddy, it may sound a bit queer, and that's simply because y

ou never heard it before, but it's a little gold-mine."

"A maggot-factory! Really now, Cubbage! Please be sensible!"

Glance wished her father wouldn't call him Cubbage.

"You never heard speak of a maggot-factory, Mr Hoddy?"

"I certainly have not!"

"There's maggot-factories going now, real big companies with managers and directors and all, and you know what, Mr Hoddy? They're making millions!"

"Nonsense, man."

"And you know why they're making millions?" Claud paused, but he did not notice now that his listener's face was slowly turning yellow. "It's because of the enormous demand for maggots, Mr Hoddy."

At that moment Mr Hoddy was listening also to other voices, the voices of his customers across the counter--Mrs Rabbits, for instance, as he sliced off her ration of butter, Mrs Rabbits with her brown moustache and always talking so loud and saying well, well, well; he could hear her now saying "Well, well, well Mr Hoddy, so your Clarice got married last week, did she. Very nice too, I must say, and what was it you said her husband does, Mr Hoddy?"

He owns a maggot-factory, Mrs Rabbits.

No, thank you, he told himself, watching Claud with his small, hostile eyes. No thank you very much indeed. I don't want that.

"I can't say," he announced primly, "that I myself have ever had occasion to purchase a maggot."

"Now you come to mention it, Mr Hoddy, nor have I. Nor has many other people we know. But let me ask you something else. How many times you have occasion to purchase... a crown wheel and pinion, for instance?"

This was a shrewd question and Claud permitted himself a slow mawkish smile.

"What's that got to do with maggots?"

"Exactly this--that certain people buy certain things, see. You never bought a crown wheel and pinion in your life, but that don't say there isn't men getting rich this very moment making them--because there is. It's the same with maggots!"

"Would you mind telling me who these unpleasant people are who buy maggots?"

"Maggots are bought by fishermen, Mr Hoddy. Amateur fishermen. There's thousands and thousands of fishermen all over the country going out every week-end fishing the rivers and all of them wanting maggots. Willing to pay good money for them, too. You go along the river there anywhere you like above Marlow on a Sunday and you'll see them lining the banks. Sitting there one beside the other simply lining the banks of both sides."

"Those men don't buy maggots. They go down the bottom of the garden and dig worms."

"Now that's just where you're wrong, Mr Hoddy, if you'll allow me to sa y so. That's just where you're absolutely wrong. They want maggots, not wor ms."

"In that case they get their own maggots."

"They don't want to get their own maggots. Just imagine Mr Hoddy, it's S aturday afternoon and you're going out fishing and a nice clean tin of maggo ts arrives by post and all you've got to do is slip it in the fishing bag an d away you go. You don't think fellers is going out digging for worms and hu nting for maggots when they can have them delivered right to their very door steps like that just for a bob or two, do you?"

"And might I ask how you propose to run this maggot-factory of yours?" When he spoke the word maggot, it seemed as if he were spitting out a sour little pip from his mouth.

"Easiest thing in the world to run a maggotfactory." Claud was gaining c onfidence now and warming to his subject. "All you need is a couple of old o il drums and a few lumps of rotten meat or a sheep's head, and you put them in the oil drums and that's all you do. The flies do the rest."

Had he been watching Mr Hoddy's face he would probably have stopped t here.

"Of course, it's not quite as easy as it sounds. What you've got to do ne xt is feed up your maggots with special diet. Bran and milk. And then when th ey get big and fat you put them in pint tins and post them off to your custom ers. Five shillings a pint they fetch. Five shillings a pint!" he cried, slap ping the knee. "You just imagine that, Mr Hoddy! And they say one bluebottle' !! lay twenty pints easy!"

He paused again, but merely to marshal his thoughts, for there was no stopping him now. "And there's another thing, Mr Hoddy. A good maggot-fact ory don't just breed ordinary maggots, you know. Every fisherman's got his own tastes. Maggots are commonest, but also there's lug worms. Some fishe rmen won't have nothing but lug worms. And of course there's coloured magg ots. Ordinary maggots are white, but you get them all sorts of different c olours by feeding them special foods, see. Red ones and green ones and bla ck ones and you can even get blue ones if you know what to feed them. The most difficult thing of all in a maggot-factory is a blue maggot, Mr Hoddy ."

Claud stopped to catch his breath. He was having a vision now--the sam e vision that accompanied all his dreams of wealth--of an immense factory building with tall chimneys and hundreds of happy workers streaming in thr ough the wide wrought-iron gates and Claud himself sitting in his luxuriou s office directing operations with a calm and splendid assurance.