"There's people with brains studying these things this very minute," he w ent on. "So you got to jump in quick unless you want to get left out in the c old. That's the secret of big business, jumping in quick before all the other s, Mr Hoddy."

Glance, Ada, and the father sat absolutely still looking straight ahead. None of them moved or spoke. Only Claud rushed on.

"Just so long as you make sure your maggots is alive when you post 'em. They've got to be wiggling, see. Maggots is no good unless they're wiggling. And when we really get going, when we've built up a little capital, then we 'll put up some glasshouses."

Another pause, and Claud stroked his chin. "Now I expect you're all wonde ring why a person should want glasshouses in a maggotfactory. Well--I'll tell you. It's for the flies in the winter, see. Most important to take care of y our flies in the winter."

"I think that's enough, thank you, Cubbage," Mr Hoddy said suddenly.

Claud looked up and for the first time he saw the expression on the man's face. It stopped him cold.

"I don't want to hear any more about it," Mr Hoddy said.

"All I'm trying to do, Mr Hoddy," Claud cried, "is give your little girl e verything she can possibly desire. That's all I'm thinking of night and day, M r Hoddy."

"Then all I hope is you'll be able to do it without the help of maggots."

"Dad!" Glance cried, alarmed. "I simply won't have you talking to Claud l ike that."

"I'll talk to him how I wish, thank you Miss."

"I think it's time I was getting along," Claud saidd. "Good night."

MR FEASEY

We were both up early when the big day came.

I wandered into the kitchen for a shave, but Claud got dressed right awa y and went outside to arrange about the straw. The kitchen was a front room and through the window I could see the sun just coming up behind the line of trees on top of the ridge the other side of the valley.

Each time Claud came past the window with an armload of straw I noticed over the rim of the mirror the intent, breathless expression on his face, th e great round bullet-head thrusting forward and the forehead wrinkled into d eep corrugations right up to the hairline. I'd only seen this look on him on ce before and that was the evening he'd asked Glance to marry him. Today he was so excited he even walked funny, treading softly as though the concrete

around the filling-station were a shade too hot for the soles of his feet; a
nd he kept packing more and more straw into the back of the van to make it c
omfortable for Jackie.

Then he came into the kitchen to get breakfast, and I watched him put th
e pot of soup on the stove and begin stirring it. He had a long metal spoon
and he kept on stirring and stirring all the time it was coming to the boil,
and about every half minute he leaned forward and stuck his nose into that
sickly-sweet steam of cooking horseflesh. Then he started putting extras int
o it three peeled onions, a few young carrots, a cupful of stinging-nettle t
ops, a teaspoon of Valentines Meat Juice, twelve drops of cod-liver oil--and
everything he touched was handled very gently with the ends of his big fat
fingers as though it might have been a little fragment of Venetian glass. He
took some minced horsemeat from the icebox, measured one handful into Jacki
e's bowl, three into the other, and when the soup was ready he shared it out
between the two, pouring it over the meat.

It was the same ceremony I'd seen performed each morning for the past f
ive months, but never with such intense and breathless concentration as thi
s. There was no talk, not even a glance my way, and when he turned and went
out again to fetch the dogs, even the back of his neck and the shoulders s
eemed to be whispering, 'Oh, Jesus, don't let anything go wrong, and especi
ally don't let me do anything wrong today.'

I heard him talking softly to the dogs in the pen as he put the leashes o
n them, and when he brought them around into the kitchen, they came in pranci
ng and pulling to get at the breakfast, treading up and down with their front
feet and waving their enormous tails from side to side, like whips.

"All right," Claud said, speaking at last. "Which is it?"

Most mornings he'd offer to bet me a pack of cigarettes, but there were b
igger things at stake today and I knew all he wanted for the moment was a lit
tle extra reassurance.

He watched me as I walked once around the two beautiful, identical, tall
, velvety-black dogs, and he moved aside, holding the leashes at arms' lengt
h to give me a better view.

"Jackie!" I said, trying the old trick that never worked. "Hey, Jackie!"
Two identical heads with identical expressions flicked around to look at me
, four bright, identical, deep-yellow eyes stared into mine. There'd been a
time when I fancied the eyes of one were slightly darker yellow than those o
f the other. There'd also been a time when I thought I could recognize Jacki
e because of a deeper brisket and a shade more muscle on the hindquarters. B
ut it wasn't so.

"Come on," Claud said. He was hoping that today of all days I would mak
e a bad guess.

"This one," I said. "This is Jackie."

"Which?"

"This one on the left."

"There!" he cried, his whole face suddenly beaming. "You're wrong again!"

"I don't think I'm wrong."

"You're about as wrong as you could possibly be. And now listen, Gordon, and I'll tell you something. All these last weeks, every morning while you've been trying to pick him out--you know what?"

"What?"

"I've been keeping count. And the result is you haven't been right even one-half the time! You'd have done better tossing a coin!"

What he meant was that if I (who saw them every day and side by side) couldn't do it, why the hell should we be frightened of Mr Feasey? Claud knew Mr Feasey was famous for spotting ringers, but he knew also that it could be very difficult to tell the difference between two dogs when there wasn't any.

He put the bowls of food on the floor, giving Jackie the one with the least meat because he was running today. When he stood back to watch them eat, the shadow of deep concern was back again on his face and the large pale eyes were staring at Jackie with the same rapt and melting look of love that up till recently had been reserved only for Glance.

"You see, Gordon," he said. "It's just what I've always told you. For the last hundred years there's been all manner of ringers, some good and some bad, but in the whole history of dogracing there's never been a ringer like this."

"I hope you're right," I said, and my mind began travelling back to that freezing afternoon just before Christmas, four months ago, when Claud had asked to borrow the van and had driven away in the direction of Aylesbury without saying where he was going. I had assumed he was off to see Glance, but late in the afternoon he had returned bringing with him this dog he said he'd bought off a man for thirty-five shillings.

"Is he fast?" I had said. We were standing out by the pumps and Claud was holding the dog on a leash and looking at him, and a few snowflakes were falling and settling on the dog's back. The motor of the van was still running.

"Fast!" Claud had said. "He's just about the slowest dog you ever saw in your whole life!"

"Then what you buy him for?"

"Well," he had said, the big bovine face secret and cunning, "it occurred to me that maybe he might possibly look a little bit like Jackie. What d'you think?"

"I suppose he does a bit, now you come to mention it."

He had handed me the leash and I had taken the new dog inside to dry h
im off while Claud had gone round to the pen to fetch his beloved. And whe
n he returned and we put the two of them together for the first time, I ca
n remember him stepping back and saying, "Oh, Jesus!" and standing dead st
ill in front of them like he was seeing a phantom. Then he became very qui
ck and quiet. He got down on his knees and began comparing them carefully
point by point, and it was almost like the room was getting warmer and war
mer the way I could feel his excitement growing every second through this
long silent examination in which even the toenails and the dewclaws, eight
een on each dog, were matched alongside one another for colour.

"Look," he said at last, standing up. "Walk them up and down the room a
few times, will you?" And then he had stayed there for quite five or six min
utes leaning against the stove with his eyes half closed and his head on one
side, watching them and frowning and chewing his lips. After that, as thoug
h he didn't believe what he had seen the first time, he had gone down again
on his knees to recheck everything once more; but suddenly, in the middle of
it, he had jumped up and looked at me, his face fixed and tense, with a cur
ious whiteness around the nostrils and the eyes. "All right," he had said, a
little tremor in his voice. 'You know what?

We're home. We're rich."

And then the secret conferences between us in the kitchen, the detailed
planning, the selection of the most suitable track, and finally every other
Saturday, eight times in all, locking up my filling-station (losing a whole
afternoon's custom) and driving the ringer all the way up to Oxford to a scr
uffy little track out in the fields near Headington where the big money was
played but which was actually nothing except a line of old posts and cord to
mark the course, an upturned bicycle for pulling the dummy hare, and at the
far end, in the distance, six traps and the starter. We had driven this rin
ger up there eight times over a period of sixteen weeks and entered him with
Mr Feasey and stood around on the edge of the crowd in freezing raining col
d, waiting for his name to go up on the blackboard in chalk. The Black Panth
er we called him. And when his time came, Claud would always lead him down t
o the traps and I would stand at the finish to catch him and keep him clear
of the fighters, the gipsy dogs that the gipsies so often slipped in special
ly to tear another one to pieces at the end of a race.

But you know, there was something rather sad about taking this dog all
the way up there so many times and letting him run and watching him and h
oping and praying that whatever happened he would always come last. Of cou
rse the praying wasn't necessary and we never really had a moment's worry
because the old fellow simply couldn't gallop and that's all there was to
it. He ran exactly like a crab. The only time he didn't come last was when
a big fawn dog by the name of Amber Flash put his boot in a hole and brok

e a hock and finished on three legs. But even then ours only just beat him . So this way we got him right down to bottom grade with the scrubbers, an d the last time we were there all the bookies were laying him twenty or th irty to one and calling his name and begging people to back him.

Now at last, on this sunny April day, it was Jackie's turn to go instead. Claud said we mustn't run the ringer any more or Mr Feasey might begin to ge t tired of him and throw him out altogether, he was so slow. Claud said this was the exact psychological time to have it off, and that Jackie would win it anything between thirty and fifty lengths.

He had raised Jackie from a pup and the dog was only fifteen months no w, but he was a good fast runner. He'd never raced yet; but we knew he was fast from clocking him round the little private schooling track at Uxbrid ge where Claud had taken him every Sunday since he was seven months old--e xcept once when he was having some inoculations, Claud said he probably wa sn't fast enough to win top grade at Mr Feasey's, but where we'd got him n ow, in bottom grade with the scrubbers, he could fall over and get up agai n and still win it twenty well, anyway ten or fifteen lengths, Claud said.

So all I had to do this morning was go to the bank in the village and d raw out fifty pounds for myself and fifty for Claud which I would lend him as an advance against wages, and then at twelve o'clock lock up the filling -station and hang the notice on one of the pumps saying GONE FOR THE DAY. C laud would shut the ringer in the pen at the back and put Jackie in the van and off we'd go. I won't say I was as excited as Claud, but there again, I didn't have all sorts of important things depending on it either, like buy ing a house and being able to get married. Nor was I almost born in a kenne l with greyhounds like he was, walking about thinking of absolutely nothing else all day except perhaps Glance in the evenings. Personally, I had my o wn career as a filling station owner to keep me busy, not to mention second -hand cars, but if Claud wanted to fool around with dogs that was all right with me, especially a thing like today--if it came off. As a matter of fac t, I don't mind admitting that every time I thought about the money we were putting on and the money we might win, my stomach gave a little lurch.

The dogs had finished their breakfast now and Claud took them out for a short walk across the field opposite while I got dressed and fried the eggs. Afterwards, I went to the bank and drew out the money (all in ones), and th e rest of the morning seemed to go very quickly serving customers.

At twelve sharp I locked up and hung the notice on the pump. Claud cam e around from the back leading Jackie and carrying a large suitcase made o f reddish-brown cardboard.

"Suitcase?"

"For the money," Claud answered. "You said yourself no man can carry t wo thousand pounds in his pockets."

It was a lovely yellow spring day with the buds bursting all along the h edges and the sun shining through the new pale green leaves on the big beech tree across the road. Jackie looked wonderful, with two big hard muscles th e size of melons bulging on his hindquarters, his coat glistening like black velvet. While Claud was putting the suitcase in the van, the dog did a litt le prancing jig on his toes to show how fit he was, then he looked up at me and grinned, just like he knew he was off to the races to win two thousand p ounds and a heap of glory. This Jackie had the widest most human-smiling gri n I ever saw. Not only did he lift his upper lip, but he actually stretched the corners of his mouth so you could see every tooth in his head except per haps one or two of the molars right at the back; and every time I saw him do it I found myself waiting to hear him start laughing out loud as well.

We got in the van and off we went. I was doing the driving. Claud was beside me and Jackie was standing up on the straw in the rear looking over our shoulders through the windshield. Claud kept turning round and trying to make him lie down so he wouldn't get thrown whenever we went round the sharp corners, but the dog was too excited to do anything except grin bac k at him and wave his enormous tail.

"You got the money, Gordon?" Claud was chain-smoking cigarettes and quit e unable to sit still.

"Yes."

"Mine as well?"

"I got a hundred and five altogether. Five for the winder like you said, so he won't stop the hare and make it a no-race."

"Good," Claud said, rubbing his hands together hard as though he were f reezing cold. "Good, good, good."

We drove through the little narrow High Street of Great Missenden and caught a glimpse of old Rummins going into The Nag's Head for his morning pint, then outside the village we turned left and climbed over the ridge o f the Chilterns towards Princes Risborough, and from there it would only b e twenty-odd miles to Oxford.

And now a silence and a kind of tension began to come over us both. We s at very quiet, not speaking at all, each nursing his own fears and excitemen ts, containing his anxiety. And Claud kept smoking his cigarettes and throwi ng them half finished out the window. Usually, on these trips, he talked his head off all the way there and back, all the things he'd done with dogs in his life, the jobs he'd pulled, the places he'd been, the money he'd won; an d all the things other people had done with dogs, the thievery, the cruelty, the unbelievable trickery and cunning of owners at the flapping tracks. But today I don't think he was trusting himself to speak very much. At this poi nt, for that matter, nor was I. I was sitting there watching the road and tr ying to keep my mind off the immediate future by thinking back on all that s

tuff Claud had told me about this curious greyhound racing racket.

I swear there wasn't a man alive who knew more about it than Claud did, and ever since we'd got the ringer and decided to pull this job, he'd taken it upon himself to give me an education in the business. By now, in theory a t any rate, I suppose I knew nearly as much as him.

It had started during the very first strategy conference we'd had in the kitchen. I can remember it was the day after the ringer arrived and we were sitting there watching for customers through the window, and Claud was expl aining to me all about what we'd have to do, and I was trying to follow him as best I could until finally there came one question I had to ask.

"What I don't see," I had said, "is why you use the ringer at all. Wouldn 't it be safer if we use Jackie all the time and simply stop him the first ha lf dozen races so he comes last? Then when we're good and ready, we can let h im go. Same result in the end, wouldn't it be, if we do it right? And no dang er of being caught."

Well, as I say, that did it. Claud looked up at me quickly and he said, "Hey! None of that! I'd just like you to know, 'stopping's' something I ne ver do. What's come over you, Gordon?" He seemed genuinely pained and shock ed by what I had said.

"I don't see anything wrong with it."

"Now, listen to me, Gordon. Stopping a good dog breaks his heart. A good dog knows he's fast, and seeing all the others out there in front and not bei ng able to catch them--it breaks his heart, I tell you. And what's more, you wouldn't be making suggestions like that if you knew some of the tricks them fellers do to stop their dogs at the flapping tracks."

"Such as what, for example?" I had asked.

"Such as anything in the world almost, so long as it makes the dog go slo wer. And it takes a lot of stopping, a good greyhound does. Full of guts and so mad keen you can't even let them watch a race, they'll tear the leash righ t out of your hand rearing to go. Many's the time I've seen one with a broken leg insisting on finishing the race."

He had paused then, looking at me thoughtfully with those large pale eyes , serious as hell and obviously thinking deep. "Maybe," he had said, "if we'r e going to do this job properly I'd better tell you a thing or two so's you'l l know what we're up against."

"Go ahead and tell me," I had said. "I'd like to know."

For a moment he stared in silence out the window. "The main thing you go t to remember," he had said darkly, "is that all these fellers going to the flapping tracks with dogs--they're artful. They're more artful than you coul d possibly imagine." Again he paused, marshalling his thoughts.

"Now take for example the different ways of stopping a dog. The first, th e commonest, is strapping."

"Strapping?"

"Yes. Strapping 'em up. That's commonest. Pulling the muzzle-strap tight around their necks so they can't hardly breathe, see. A clever man knows just which hole on the strap to use and just how many lengths it'll take off his dog in a race. Usually a couple of notches is good for five or six lengths. D o it up real tight and he'll come last. I've known plenty of dogs collapse an d die from being strapped up tight on a hot day. Strangulated, absolutely str angulated, and a very nasty thing it was too. Then again, some of 'em just ti e two of the toes together with black cotton. Dog never runs well like that. Unbalances him."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"Then there's others that put a piece of fresh-chewed gum up under their tails, right up close where the tail joins the body. And there's nothing funn y about that," he had said, indignant. "The tail of a running dog goes up and down ever so slightly and the gum on the tail keeps sticking to the hairs on the backside, just where it's tenderest. No dog likes that, you know. Then t here's sleeping pills. That's used a lot nowadays. They do it by weight, exac tly like a doctor, and they measure the powder according to whether they want to slow him up five or ten or fifteen lengths. Those are just a few of the o rdinary ways," he had said. "Actually they're nothing. Absolutely nothing, co mpared with some of the other things that's done to hold a dog back in a race , especially by the gipsies. There's things the gipsies do that are almost to o disgusting to mention, such as when they're just putting the dog in the tra p, things you wouldn't hardly do to your worst enemies."

And when he had told me about those which were, indeed, terrible things b ecause they had to do with physical injury, quickly, painfully inflicted--the n he had gone or, to tell me what they did when they wanted the dog to win. " There's just as terrible things done to make 'em go fast as to make 'em go sl ow," he had said softly, his face veiled and secret. "And perhaps the commone st of all is wintergreen. Whenever you see a dog going around with no hair on his back or little bald patches all over him that's wintergreen. Just before the race they rub it hard into the skin. Sometimes it's Sloan's Liniment, bu t mostly it's wintergreen. Stings terrible. Stings so bad that all the old do g wants to do is run, run, run as fast as he possibly can to get away from th e pain.

"Then there's special drugs they give with the needle. Mind you, that's the modern method and most of the spivs at the track are too ignorant to use it. It's the fellers coming down from London in the big cars with stadium d ogs they've borrowed for the day by bribing the trainer--they're the ones wh o use the needle."

I could remember him sitting there at the kitchen table with a cigarett e dangling from his mouth and dropping his eyelids to keep out the smoke an

d looking at me through his wrinkled, nearly closed eyes, and saying, "What you've got to remember, Gordon, is this. There's nothing they won't do to make a dog win if they want him to. On the other hand, no dog can run faste r than he's built, no matter what they do to him. So if we can get Jackie d own into bottom grade, then we're home. No dog in bottom grade can get near him, not even with wintergreen and needles. Not even with ginger."

"Ginger?"

"Certainly. That's a common one, ginger is. What they do, they take a piec e of raw ginger about the size of a walnut, and about five minutes before the off they slip it into the dog."

"You mean in his mouth? He eats it?"

"No," he had said. "Not in his mouth."

And so it had gone on. During each of the eight long trips we had subseq uently made to the track with the ringer I had heard more and more about thi s charming sport--more, especially, about the methods of stopping them and m aking them go (even the names of the drugs and the quantities to use). I hea rd about 'The rat treatment' (for non-chasers, to make them chase the dummy hare), where a rat is placed in a can which is then tied around the dog's ne ck. There's a small hole in the lid of the can just large enough for the rat to poke its head out and nip the dog. But the dog can't get at the rat, and so naturally he goes half crazy running around and being bitten in the neck , and the more he shakes the can the more the rat bites him. Finally, someon e releases the rat, and the dog, who up to then was a nice docile tail-waggi ng animal who wouldn't hurt a mouse, pounces on it in a rage and tears it to pieces. Do this a few times, Claud had said--"mind you, I don't hold with i t myself"--and the dog becomes a real killer who will chase anything, even t he dummy hare.

We were over the Chilterns now and running down out of the beechwoods into the flat elmand oak-tree country south of Oxford. Claud sat quietly b eside me, nursing his nervousness and smoking cigarettes, and every two or three minutes he would turn round to see if Jackie was all right. The dog was at last lying down, and each time Claud turned round, he whispered so mething to him softly, and the dog acknowledged his words with a faint mov ement of the tail that made the straw rustle.

Soon we would be coming into Thame, the broad High Street where they penned the pigs and cows and sheep on market day, and where the Fair came once a year with the swings and roundabouts and bumping cars and gipsy c aravans right there in the street in the middle of the town. Claud was bo rn in Thame, and we'd never driven through it yet without him mentioning the fact.

"Well," he said as the first houses came into sight, "here's Thame. I w as born and bred in Thame, you know, Gordon."

"You told me."

"Lots of funny things we used to do around here when we was nippers," he said, slightly nostalgic.

"I'm sure."

He paused, and I think more to relieve the tension building up inside him than anything else, he began talking about the years of his youth.

"There was a boy next door," he said. "Gilbert Gomm his name was. Litt le sharp ferrety face and one leg a bit shorter'n the other. Shocking thin gs him and me used to do together. You know one thing we done, Gordon?"

"What?"

"We'd go into the kitchen Saturday nights when mum and dad were at the p ub, and we'd disconnect the pipe from the gas-ring and bubble the gas into a milk bottle full of water. Then we'd sit down and drink it out of teacups."

"Was that so good?"

"Good! It was absolutely disgusting! But we'd put lashings of sugar in and then it didn't taste so bad."

"Why did you drink it?"

Claud turned and looked at me, incredulous. "You mean you never drunk 'Snakes Water'!"

"Can't say I have."

"I thought everyone done that when they was kids! It intoxicates you, ju st like wine only worse, depending on how long you let the gas bubble throug h. We used to get reeling drunk together there in the kitchen Saturday night s and it was marvellous. Until one night Dad comes home early and catches us . I'll never forget that night as long as I live. There was me holding the m ilk bottle, and the gas bubbling through it lovely, and Gilbert kneeling on the floor ready to turn off the tap the moment I give the word, and in walks Dad."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, Christ, Gordon, that was terrible. He didn't say one word, but he s tands there by the door and he starts feeling for his belt, undoing the buck le very slow and pulling the belt slow out of his trousers, looking at me al l the time. Great big feller he was, with great big hands like coal hammers and a black moustache and them little purple veins running all over his chee ks. Then he comes over quick and grabs me by the coat and lets me have it, h ard as he can, using the end with the buckle on it and honest to God, Gordon , I thought he was going to kill me. But in the end he stops and then he put s on the belt again, slow and careful, buckling it up and tuckling in the fl ap and belching with the beer he'd drunk. And then he walks out again back t o the pub, still without saying a word. Worst hiding I ever had in my life."

"How old were you then?"